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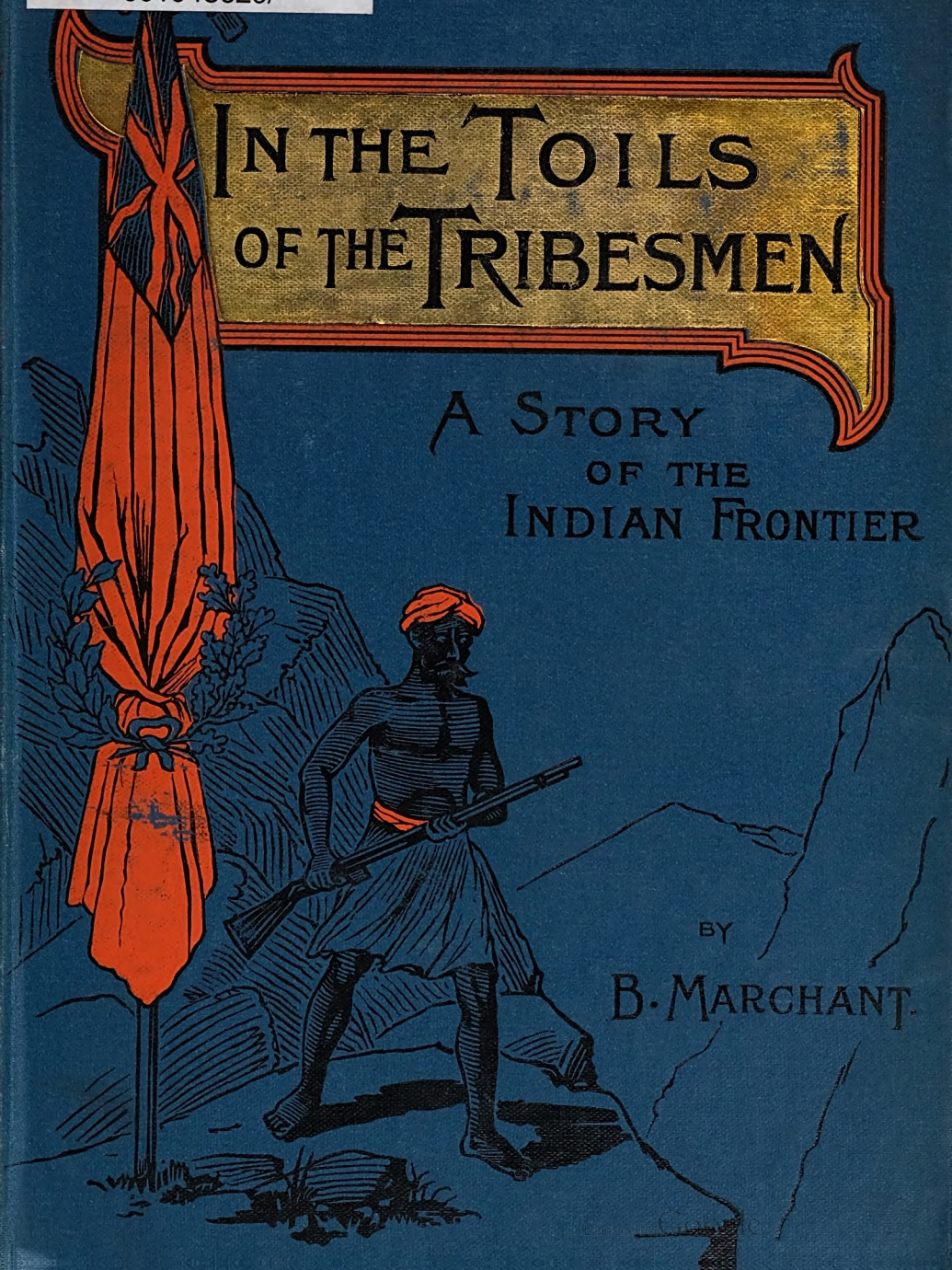
In the Toils of the Tribesmen

A Story of the Indian Frontier



BY

B. MARCHANT.

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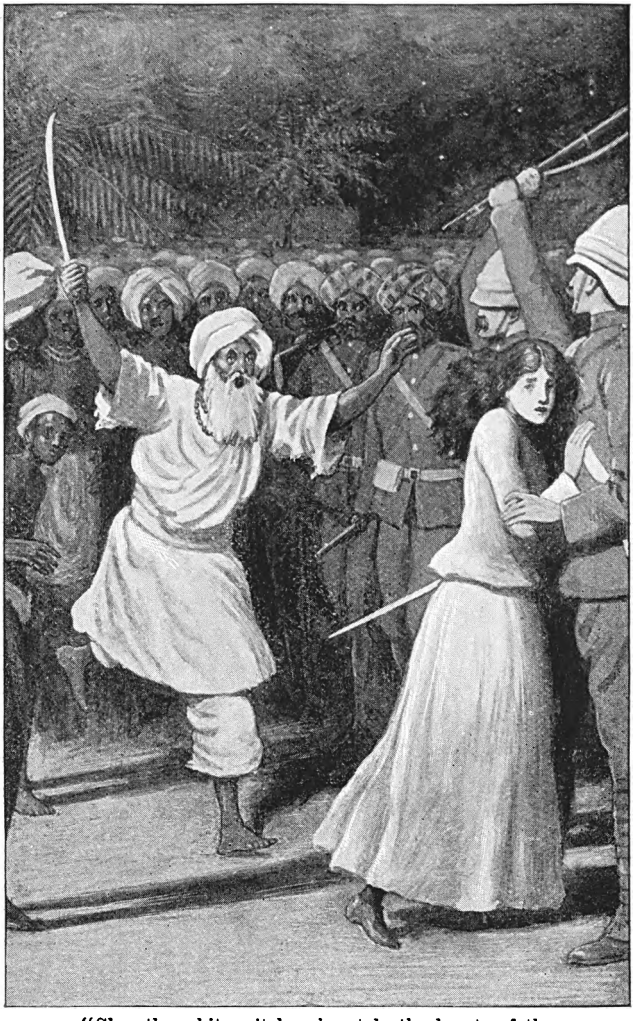

"Slay the white witch, who stole the hearts of the warriors!"—*p.* 143.

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IN THE TOILS OF THE TRIBESMEN

A Story of the Indian Frontier

BY

BESSIE MARCHANT,
Author of "Winning his Way," "The Bonded Three," &c.

London
GALL AND INGLIS, 25 PATERNOSTER SQUARE;
AND EDINBURGH.

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INTRODUCTION.

LYING at the upper or northern end of the Gulf of Cutch, is the great morass or Rann, really a swampy waste, or desert of water and sand.

For six months in every year, from May to October, the Rann is in flood, and inaccessible saving by boats.

The high and widely isolated ridges are peopled by a race steeped in superstition, and in the dense ignorance arising from centuries of neglect. No further back than a hundred years ago, the custom of slaying the female infants was so generally practised, that the British Resident of Bhooj gave it as his opinion, that, in a tribe of twelve thousand Jharejahs, only thirty women were allowed to grow up. These were slain because the birth of a daughter was looked upon as a domestic calamity, a positive misfortune; and, as was sometimes asserted, a punishment for sin or wrong-doing. Hence it came about that these unfortunate infants were killed off as quickly as possible, and it was only by accident that one was allowed to survive.

The practice of suttee, or burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands, which an enlightened civilisation is fast banishing from the great Empire of

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India, has lingered long in the wide deserts and forest fastnesses of Cutch, in spite of every effort to stamp the cruel usage out. On the death of a chief, or a very rich man, not one, but many women and girls yield their lives in sacrifice, in order that the dead man may not be lonely in heaven, or lack attendants to minister to his pleasure.

The priests of Brahma wield an influence, too, in the keeping up of their terrible superstitions, which no mere outsider can measure or gauge. Their word is law in every household where Brahma is worshipped, and, in many instances, personal spite has a very prominent place in their decisions regarding the fate of their victims.

So terrible is the fate of any woman who refuses to "accompany her husband to heaven," that the poor creatures mostly prefer the quicker death on the funeral pyre, to the slower, but equally sure destruction by starvation and ill-usage, which will be their portion as widows.

The main incidents of the story have been culled from missionary records, and from newspaper reports of the seizure of contraband of war, carried by British ships to the lonely ports of the Arabian Sea.

Verily, truth is stranger than fiction, and the ways of Divine Providence are marvellous exceedingly.

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IN THE

TOILS OF THE TRIBESMEN;

OR,

For his Country's Sake.

CHAPTER I.

THE RAID ON SHANKOASH.

BANG! bang! bang! bang!

Toto was ringing the bell for morning church, at least he was beating with a thick stick upon a tin pan, which, in Shankoash, was equivalent to bell-ringing.

He was squatting cross-legged in the sunshine at the door of the little mission church, which stood at the upper end of the village, and watching the coming of the small congregation.

The first of these to arrive was, as usual, Beni Lam, who plodded painfully along, supporting his feeble steps by a stout staff. After him came four or five women, timid, nervous creatures, swathed in dirty cotton veils, most of them carrying infants; whilst a string of juveniles trotted on either side, in front, or in the rear, as their fancy dictated.

When these had passed into the building, another group appeared, coming from a small house in the

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rear of the church, and consisting of the missionary, his wife, and their two young daughters.

At sight of them Toto slackened his thumping to slow, solemn thuds on the pan, which was his way of announcing that it was time for service to begin.

The clergyman was wearing his surplice, and carrying his service-book in his hand, whilst the elder girl, Coralie, had a couple of music books tucked under one arm. She was about fifteen, tall, and well-built, with a merry face, and steadfast gray eyes that were like her father's. But Susette, the little girl, who walked with her mother, was younger by several years, blue-eyed, delicate, and fretful of countenance.

Toto rose from his crouching posture when they had passed, and followed them into the church, carrying with him the tin pan and the thick stick. The congregation was disappointingly small, and the missionary sighed as he looked round the bare little church, while Coralie, slipping behind the screen, commenced to play a voluntary on the wheezy old harmonium.

Missionary enterprise languished in the scattered, sparsely-populated district of Shankoash. Mr. Blake, the missionary, was earnest and devout; toiling hard to win the natives from their ignorance and superstition to the civilising influences of the Christian religion. And Coralie ably seconded his efforts by teaching the children and going among the women

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in their homes, because Mrs. Blake had no strength to do so.

But the people fought shy of the new religion, which taught them to refrain from stealing, and to utter only what was truth. Beni Lam, indeed, was a staunch adherent, but then he was getting too old for field work, and was anxious to secure the post of sub-surveyor to the township, together with the position of post-office baboo, these combined duties being remunerated with a house to live in, and a salary sufficient to lift him far above want. And as the sahib-father of the mission church had, doubtless, the ear of the Government, Beni Lam had promptly declared for the new faith, and was zealous in his attendance at public worship.

Toto also was zealous according to his light, but then he was a paid servant of the church, and deemed his devotion to be a part of his duty, like cleaning the floor, or summoning the congregation to the services.

The prayers and the lessons were in the Sindhi tongue, which the natives knew and could follow, though they spoke for the most part a mongrel dialect, very difficult to understand.

Mrs. Blake and Susette had a low bench near the harmonium; Beni Lam and Toto squatted side by side in the centre of the floor; whilst the women and children were huddled together in the

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far corner, they not being considered good enough, in Shankoash etiquette, to sit any nearer to the masculine worshippers.

The service proceeded without interruption as far as the sermon. Now this discourse of Mr. Blake's was very unlike sermons in general, having to be severely limited to the scanty intelligence of his coloured hearers. Indeed it had more likeness to a Sunday-school lesson than a sermon. Coralie wrote the text in big letters on the black-board, whilst her father read aloud, and then explained each word, illustrating the whole with a simple Bible story.

He was telling them this morning of the traveller from Jerusalem to Jericho, who fell among thieves, when suddenly the Sabbath quiet was broken by a great hubbub, which penetrated to the church and the ears of the frightened congregation.

Mr. Blake paused, for there were cries of fear and shrieks of pain pulsating through the din outside. At his momentary hesitation, Susette gave a whimpering cry, and hid her face in her mother's frock, then a perfect chorus of yells burst from the cluster of dusky juveniles, who clung to their respective mothers, and howled dolefully, whilst the noise outside waxed louder, and closer at hand.

Coralie's face grew white as the page of her music book, and her father still stood as if paralysed. But it was of no use to be afraid, and her ready wit told her that the safety of the

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congregation might be best secured by keeping them from rushing headlong to the possible danger that lay outside. Therefore, gathering up her own courage as best she could, she began to play the tune called "St. Ann," singing, in the native tongue:

"O, God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come."

Very low and quavering was her voice at first, waxing louder as the verse went on, until, by the time the third line was reached, her father and mother had joined their voices to hers, and even Susette's shrill treble piped nervously in and out of the truer melody of the three stronger voices, but the poor women in the corner crouched closer together, and moaned in chorus; they had heard those shouts and cries before, if the white people had not, and could better gauge the possibilities of what would come after.

Over and over they sang the verse, for the few poor units that went to make up the congregation had not mastered more than the first four lines of the hymn, and it would be useless to attempt to calm them with unfamiliar words.

Shots were being exchanged pretty freely outside now, and the tide of battle was evidently sweeping nearer and nearer to the little church on the hill. Presently Beni Lam hobbled out, clutching fiercely at the stout staff with which he supported his trembling limbs; it would have to be a weapon

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of defence now, though it was doubtful whether it could effect much in such feeble hands. After him went Toto, also carrying his heavy stick and tin pan, though what influence the noise would produce upon the invaders outside, it would be difficult to say, unless, indeed, it startled them into flight, which, alas and alas, it did not seem likely to do.

The four Europeans were singing still, though the noise of the fray almost overpowered their voices as they sang, for attackers and attacked were fighting on the step outside, where, only so lately, Toto had sat in the sunshine in calm content, summoning the people to worship by beating upon the tin pan.

Fierce shouts, agonised cries, and the door was flung widely open to admit the inrush of a crowd of slender brown figures, habited only in brilliant yellow loin-cloths, with a twist of the same about the head.

But they were armed, every one of them, and many a dagger dripped with blood, whilst their yellow garments here and there showed plentiful patches of the same dreadful hue.

Coralie struck a false note, it was only human to tremble, and she was dreadfully afraid. They did not stop singing, however, never mind about the time being uncertain, and the melody doubtful just there; the missionary's tenor recovered soonest

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the momentary faltering, and the female voices supported him bravely.

But the intruders stood still, just inside the door, stood as if spellbound, not daring to advance a step.

Another blunder from Coralie, not a single note this time, but a whole handful of them, causing the reedy-toned harmonium to sob and cry out, as if in protest.

Susette burst into frightened tears, and her mother ceased singing in the endeavour to comfort her, the crowd of women in the corner were shrieking wildly, and, feeling his own impotence to make his voice heard above their screaming, Mr. Blake ceased singing also, and gathering the white folds of his surplice closer about him, stepped forward across the clay floor of the church to confront the savages grouped by the door.

Coralie played on, not singing,—she was past that by this time,—and her fingers had wandered insensibly from the tune, "Saint Ann," to that air from the *Messiah*, "I know that my Redeemer liveth."

She shivered as her father approached the dusky savages, with their stained garments and dripping daggers, expecting nothing less than that they would strike him to the earth; and was nerving herself to endure the shock of seeing him killed before her eyes when, to her amazement, and his

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also, the men fell prostrate before him, in the attitude of worship.

"What is it you look for? There are no golden vessels here, nor vestments of price, that you should thrust yourself thus rudely into the earthly dwelling-place of the only true God," Mr. Blake said, sternly, addressing himself to the man who appeared to be the leader of the gang. He guessed, and rightly, that these must be some of the celebrated raiders of Rasputya, who had been in the habit of swooping down on the isolated villages within the Shankoash boundary, sacking, burning, pillaging, and slaying the miserable and unfortunate inhabitants.

"Spare us, Great Teacher, and bid the spirit of the box make music once again," implored the leader in suppliant tones, for Coralie's musical performances had come to a sudden end, and she was sitting with clasped hands, watching the scene.

The man spoke in the Sindhi tongue, and Mr. Blake answered him at once,—

"The box shall make music for you if you stay your hands from slaughter, but not for bloodshed and murder will it make melody in your ears."

"The murder is done, and the blood has been spilled until the source hath run dry. Bid the woman-child,—who is but a domestic calamity after all,—touch the box again, that the spirit within may call back in reply."

The words now were couched as a command,

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and not an entreaty at all, seeing which, Coralie commenced to play again, with nervous haste, the fragment of a fugue, part of a funeral march, some exercises on chords; anything, and everything that she could remember in that moment of terrible strain.

Her father would have protested, being in no mind to please these ruthless destroyers of Shankoash, but one look at his pale terrified wife, and the weeping Susette, reminded him of his own impotence to do more than temporise, if he could, with the formidable savages who held him in thrall.

For him death held but scanty terrors. Man could but die once, and since that once was inevitable, what mattered it whether it was now, or later?

But he was not alone. And the thought of the three who depended on him was at that moment almost more than he could bear. Coralie was courageously doing her best at the harmonium, but her face was white and drawn, and her touch on the instrument tremulous exceedingly.

The men rose from their posture of devotion. Perhaps already they had taken the measure of the Great Teacher, finding him but a mortal man like unto themselves—only weaker.

"The Rao of Rasputya," said the leader, in decided tones, "bade us bring to him much plunder, or give our lives in forfeit. Lo, we will take

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back to him the spirit that is in the box, and he will hold us blessed for ever."

It was of no avail to protest. Mr. Blake asked only for a moment of time, then, kneeling on the floor, with his wife and children close grouped around him, he commended them and himself to the keeping of the Highest, whose servant he was; and afterwards yielded himself prisoner to the raiders, only reminding them that he and his family were British subjects, and must be treated with due respect.

The Great Teacher will be as safe in Rasputya as in Shankoash," replied the leader of the band, and with this Mr. Blake was forced to be content, though he may have had misgivings on the subject.

Escorted by their captors, they were taken from the church to their own dwelling, where they were permitted to take such things as seemed strictly necessary to their comfort and well-being in the wilderness, whither they were to be hastened.

While these preparations were in progress, the remainder of the raiders were busily occupied in scouring the village for loot; killing those who resisted, driving off the women and children for slaves, and eagerly securing all vessels of brass or earthenware, with every other description of portable property that came under their ken.

Only the white people they treated with respect, and even deference, providing them with asses for

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the journey; and lavishing the most careful and particular tenderness in their handling of the church harmonium.

But it was a terrible ordeal all the same, and the missionary and his family set out with their faces towards the wilderness in silent despair, not knowing what their fate might be.

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CHAPTER II.

IN PARENTHESIS.

THE old man, Richard Blake, of Tupton Magna had three sons. But they had all disappointed him in some way or other. The eldest, and heir to the Tupton Magna estates, married early a young widow with one small son. He died without issue, and young Mrs. Blake found herself widowed for the second time, before she was thirty.

His son's death was a great blow to old Richard, who had rejoiced in him as a young man after his own heart, a brave soldier, a keen sportsman, and a vigorous athlete. Which list in the father's eyes were the sum total of manly perfection.

John, the second son, was no soldier, and had taken orders, though sorely against the will of his father, who had only been induced to yield a reluctant consent as a dying boon to his wife, who had been carried to the family vault in the churchyard of Tupton Magna, just three years before the unexpected death of young Richard, the heir.

The youngest son, Joseph, was hunch-back, and a cripple. Being born before doctors had learned

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to stretch, and pull, and knead a crooked spine straight, he had been left to grow as nature had intended him, with the result that he was a perpetual eyesore to the old man, his father, who simply hated and despised everything that was not erect, and straight, and strong.

But Joseph had lived whilst Richard had died, and those who knew the father best, whispered that half of his grief at bereavement was merely anger because the strong son had thus early met his fate, whilst the weakly one still survived to mock his woe, with an ever-present physical incapacity.

Yet, even Joseph's indiscretion in remaining alive, was not to be compared with John's sins in the matter of the obstinacy with which he clung to the career he had chosen.

Deeply imbued with the missionary spirit was John Blake, and just prior to his elder brother's death, he had offered himself for work in the mission field, which offer was promptly accepted.

Then came the tragic event which made him his father's heir, and he would probably have foregone his intention of labouring in the dark places of the earth, and, giving way to expediency, settled down to supply Richard's place at Tupton Magna, but for old Mr. Blake's unwarrantable harshness in the business.

The old man did not ask his son to remain, he ordered him to do it, in addition insisting that John should leave the church, and enter the army,

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declaring that unless his son obeyed him, he would pass him by, and make the youngest son, Joseph, his heir.

Stung to the bitterest resentment by the injustice of this mandate, John Blake declined, once and for all, to do his father's behest. And bidding farewell, as he believed, for ever, to the home of his boyhood, he sailed for India, six months after his brother's death, where he had remained ever since.

The old man never forgave him. And when he died, John's name was not even mentioned in his will, which left everything, unconditionally, to Joseph the hunch-back.

Sorely, sorely did John Blake grieve over the breach between him and his father. Not for the sake of the wealth he had lost thereby,—he was too unworldly for that,—but because no place of repentance had been given him for his own share in the wrong. And when disappointment met him in his work, and the people he had striven to lead into the light, turned back to their idols once more, he would say to himself, that it was discipline sent from heaven, to chasten him for that past act of unfilial disobedience.

His wife had come out to him from his own village of Tupton Magna, and for a time they had lived in Bombay, where Coralie and Susette were born; afterwards he was drafted to Kurrachee, and from there to Shankoash, which was surely among the very darkest of the earth's dark places.

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CHAPTER III.

THE "LUCY JANE."

Six weeks of captivity had passed away, and the missionary's family, if not reconciled to their lot, had so far become used to it, as to adapt themselves as best they could to their changed surroundings.

As yet they had suffered no hardship in the matter of food and shelter, though the former was coarse, and the latter rude. A small hut had been set apart for their use, and a daily allowance of food given to them from the stores of the Rao of Rasputya, the chief of these marsh brigands; in return for which, the captives were expected to make the "spirit in the box," speak for the benefit of the eager listeners, who had elevated that very wheezy little harmonium to a god, and worshipped it accordingly.

There was no hope of succour for them until winter should return, and the waters of the great Rann of Cutch subside sufficiently to make travelling possible. At the present they were living on a range of hills, whilst the plains below were for the nonce converted into a great lake.

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The raid on Shankoash had provided the robbers with provisions to carry them through the wet season, when, by reason of the inundation of the Rann, they were to a large extent cut off from contact with the outside world, until the waters should abate once more.

Out-door occupations were at a discount, owing to the severity with which the monsoon had set in; it had failed entirely in the two previous years, but appeared anxious on this occasion to make up for its deficiencies in the past.

Mrs. Blake complained bitterly of the leakages in the roof of their hut, which resembled a sieve when the rains were at their heaviest, and truly their plight was a miserable one, as they crouched on the ground in the driest corner of the hut, in a vain endeavour to keep from being drowned out.

The heat at this time was almost insufferable, and joined to the discomforts of their lodging, made them all languid and disinclined for exertion.

Mr. Blake had taken a half-hearted constitutional under a big umbrella one morning, intending to go as far as the end of the high ground known as Mir Aleffo's ridge, from whence an unbroken waterscape, of many a league in extent, lay revealed—water now, where dry land would afterwards appear. Presently he came running back panting with the exertion, for the morning was hotter than ever.

"Mother, Coralie, Susette, there's a British barque

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in the offing, coming from the south-west, and heading straight for the cleft in the ridge," he called, excitedly, as he splashed through the channel of liquid mud before the door.

Mrs. Blake came hurrying out, to the full as excited as he. "A British ship, are you sure, John? I should not have thought that a vessel of any size could have come so far inland," she said, in a dubious tone.

"You forget the Rasputya waterway; I should think a man o'-war might find that navigable at this time of year, and the barque is not a man-o'-war by any means. Hurry girls, and get our things together, for it may be that rescue is nearer at hand than we thought!" he said, turning to his daughters, mopping his face the while, to wipe away the profuse perspiration.

But hardly had he uttered the words, or Mrs. Blake opened her lips to voice the next question, than a little brown form, clad in a nondescript rag or two, planted himself full in the doorway, with a polite intimation that he had come to hold them in durance for a time.

John Blake looked at his wife with a growing dismay in his eyes, whilst she gazed back at him in blank despair; and the two girls, who did not yet understand, stared at them both in uncomprehending bewilderment.

"We want to see the captain of the vessel that is heading for the ridge, for he may bring us

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tidings from those who are far away," the missionary said, speaking in that gentle persuasive tone of his, that had been so effectual in the past, in his intercourse with the natives.

"Mir Aleffo hath spoken, and who shall withstand his word?" exclaimed the warrior, as he slipped his rifle from its goat-skin case, and held it ready for any emergency.

But none arose. John Blake was a man of peace. and even had he been otherwise, his unarmed resistance would have told for little against Mir Aleffo's servant, with his loaded rifle.

"Perhaps he will go away soon," whispered Coralie in her father's ear, and then, in order to re-assure the dusky sentinel guarding the threshold, they turned to their ordinary avocations once more, Mrs. Blake being occupied with sewing, whilst Coralie and Susette were busy with such lesson books, as the Rao's men had permitted them to bring from Shankoash.

The missionary, however, could settle to nothing; many, and serious misgivings were filling his heart, by reason of this refusal on the Rao's part to permit him intercourse with his countrymen on board the approaching vessel.

"Are you sure that the ship was British; might it not have been a Turkish vessel?" asked Mrs. Blake, in a low tone, of her husband, as he paced to and fro in the narrow limits of the hut.

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Mr. Blake made a movement with his hand in the direction of his pocket,—"I saw the name through that little glass of mine, and it was the *Lucy Jane*," he answered,—at which Mrs. Blake nodded her head, and looked increasingly troubled.

"Be brave, dear hearts, God will not desert us in our trouble, if we put our whole trust in Him!" he went on, seeing how downcast they looked, for it was plain to them all, that if they were prevented from intercourse with these British sailors, their hope of ultimate escape was very remote and feeble.

"Father, shall I play on the harmonium presently?" asked Coralie; "then, if the sailors are British, they will recognise the sounds, and make enquiries whence they come."

This plan commended itself to them all, but it was decided that she should wait another hour before commencing, in order to permit of the barque coming to anchorage in the cleft of the ridge.

Mir Aleffo, the Rao of Rasputya, had built his house on the summit of the ridge, which was thickly wooded wherever a tree could find root-hold in the crannies of the rock. A fine natural spring of pure, sweet water, welling out from the rugged cliffs, had been the chief inducement in the selection of this site, upon which to erect his head-quarters, and put up a series of shanties for his followers to dwell in.

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The hut in which the Blakes were lodged stood just below the wall enclosing the apartments wherein the ladies of Mir Aleffo's house resided. And Coralie had often seen some of these secluded dames, peeping at the white strangers through a hole in the wall, and had nodded and smiled to them in a friendly fashion, which had evoked more nods and smiles in return.

How long the hour seemed before the coming of the time when Coralie should open her harmonium, and work their deliverance by song! But the sixty minutes wore themselves away at last, and she was just about to begin, was even opening the lid of the instrument, when the brown man in the door interposed, saying in a solemn tone,—

"Mir Aleffo hath spoken; let there be silence, until the rising of the sun to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" cried Coralie, in well simulated astonishment, though her heart grew heavy at his words, "but I play to you every night, by the Rao's command."

"Mir Aleffo hath spoken," reiterated the fellow in dogged tones, and shifting his rifle with a menacing gesture.

Seeing that further effort on her part would be of no avail, Coralie went to sit down close beside her father, in the corner furthest away from their gaoler, whilst Mrs. Blake and Susette drew closer to them also.

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"Father, what will you do if you have to live here always?" demanded Susette, who had been crying quietly, because she was frightened.

"I shall preach the Gospel to the heathen," he remarked, sententiously.

"But they won't be preached to. Don't you remember how angry the Rao, and that old priest Mahandra, were with you when we were first brought here, because you tried to tell them about the one true God, and Jesus Christ?" she said.

"There are more ways than one of teaching Christianity to those who sit in darkness, little Susette," he replied with a wan smile, which quickly faded; "at the last I can witness a good confession by my life, and die for the Master, whom I serve."

"It must be no question of dying, John, we have our girls to think about," replied Mrs. Blake, in a reproachful tone.

Coralie slipped her hand into her father's, and laid her head against his arm; it was a way she had of showing her sympathy with him, when things took on a perplexing turn.

Two more of Mir Aleffo's followers joined the one already on guard when sunset came, and in the darkness of the moonless night, above the drip, drip, of the rain which was falling again, Coralie could hear the three men telling each other stories, in order to keep themselves awake.

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Next morning dawned without rain, and a brisk wind springing up, drove the cloud masses apart a little, permitting the sun to break through, and cheer the damp world with its beams.

The guard was withdrawn soon after daybreak, and no sooner had the brown trio turned their backs, than Mr. Blake, with Coralie for a companion, started to walk along the ridge, where yesterday he had had his glimpse of the *Lucy Jane* approaching.

"See, father, see those big packages down there under the rocks; oh, what a number there are; what can they be?" cried Coralie, excitedly, pointing to the piled-up bales of merchandise lying under the lee of the rocks.

Mr. Blake pulled out his pocket-glass, and adjusting it, brought it to bear on the bales and boxes lying down below.

"What are they, father?" she asked again, marvelling not a little that so much stuff should have been purchased by a little colony like Mir Aleffo's band, who, at the most,—even reckoning the dwellers on distant ridges, and counting in the women and children,—could not have numbered much above five hundred souls.

"It looks like drapery stuff,—cotton goods, woollens, and the like,—but I don't know," he said, in a dubious tone.

Even as they stood on the high ground watching, they could see small boats approaching from this

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direction and that, starting out from nowhere, like crows that smell carrion and haste to the feast.

Every boat was heading for the cleft in the ridge, and they came swiftly on; a pair of oarsmen to each craft. Mr. Blake and Coralie were watching with great interest now, whilst a certain dark suspicion that had sprung to life in the mind of the missionary, gathered strength as he saw that the cargo left by the *Lucy Jane* was—a portion of it at least—to be re-shipped on these small rowing boats.

Each boat as it drew alongside the natural jetty in the cleft of the ridge, received one or more of those mysterious bales or boxes for its lading, and most unusually heavy they must have been, if one might judge from the manner in which the boats sank in the water after receiving their cargo.

"Coralie, let us go home to the others," Mr. Blake said, after watching ten or twelve boats lade and depart.

She looked at him in surprise. "What is it, father? What do you fear?"

But he only shook his head with a dubious air, "I don't know yet, time alone will show. But I have my doubts, child, I have my doubts of the *Lucy Jane*."

And not another word than this could Coralie get out of him during their walk back along the ridge to the little hut nestling under the outer walls of the stronghold of Mir Aleffo.

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CHAPTER IV.

PECULIAR COTTON GOODS.

A FEW days after this passed uneventfully enough, and Mr. Blake was repenting of his hastily formed suspicions, when he was startled one morning by the sound of firing on the opposite side of the ridge.

Made wary by past experience, he affected to take no notice at all of the continued crack, crack, crack, of rifles on the other side of the hill, though, unless he had been very deaf indeed, it was impossible for him to avoid hearing.

Having cautioned his wife and the two girls to pay no apparent heed to the firing either, John Blake went about his ordinary avocations with an air of outward indifference, although his ears were strained to listen for any variation in the sounds of shooting, that might lead him to a correct conclusion as to its object.

One or two of Mir Aleffo's men were to be seen in the vicinity of the hut most of the day, and the missionary noticing this, resolved to make no attempt at extending his range of observation, for

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that day at least. Instead, he spent great care and pains over the rigging up of some fishing-tackle, and when it was completed, went down to one of the pools below his hut, to try his skill in angling.

Whilst he was gone, Coralie, who had been sitting on the little verandah by the side of the hut, laboriously patching a garment that threatened to fall in pieces, singing to herself the while, became suddenly aware of a slim brown hand that was beckoning to her from the hole in the wall, where the Rao's wives were secluded.

Putting her work down upon the bench where she had been sitting, Coralie picked her way through the soft mud, until she was close under the wall.

"What is it, what do you want?" she asked in the Sindhi tongue, standing on tip-toe, the better to reach the hole in the wall.

"You are a funny girl; and your dress, it is so strange; tell me where you have come from, and what you are doing here on Mir Aleffo's ridge?" demanded the voice, which was young and pleasing, although a trifle dictatorial withal, as if its owner were used to issuing commands, and having them obeyed.

Coralie, who was of a social disposition, obeyed this injunction nothing loth, and recounted at some length the story of the raid on Shankoash, and the capture of her family by the soldiers of the Rao, winding up with a description of the tragic

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ending of Toto and Beni Lam, who died in a vain endeavour to defend their own.

"And your father, whom did he kill?" asked the voice again, and Coralie saw a pair of bright black eyes peering at her through the hole in the wall.

"My father is a man of peace; he has never in all his life slain a man," she said, with a thrill of honest pride in the avowal, and then was angry at the unbelieving scorn at which her words were received.

"If your father has never killed anyone, what a woman-man he must be," said the owner of the bright eyes.

"My father is a Christian, and a gentleman," retorted Coralie, with the air of one who has summed up the whole situation in a single sentence, and left nothing unsaid either.

"What is that?" asked the other, in so much wonderment, that Coralie laughed outright at her own stupidity, in making such a statement to one who had probably never heard the terms before.

"Perhaps you would not understand if I explained, and after all it does not matter. Won't you tell me instead who you are, and why you are shut up behind that wall all the time, instead of walking about on the ridge to look at the water?" she asked, persuasively.

"I am Mir Aleffo's daughter, and I am called

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Amrita, which means the water of immortality. The women of the Rao's household are shut up from the common gaze, which might sully the fairness of their beauty," explained the other.

"Oh, how dreadful! I am glad that I am not a Rao's daughter, to be shut up always. Don't you long to get out sometimes?" cried Coralie, in a sympathetic tone.

"When the waters are up, I am always longing to be in a boat, to feel it heaving, and lifting under me. Have you ever been in a boat, little girl; and is it good to be there?" questioned Amrita, in an envious tone.

Coralie indulged in a grimace, for she was remembering their voyage from Bombay to Kurrachee, and how very sea-sick she had been. "It is pleasant sometimes, and for some people, but it made me very ill," she said, answering the question with strict impartiality.

"I should not be ill, I am sure of it"—began Amrita, and then her head disappeared with quite alarming suddenness from the hole in the wall; there was a sound of strident scolding, and a series of vigorous slaps on bare arms, that made Coralie very thankful indeed that she was not Amrita.

Slowly, and thoughtfully, she picked her way back through the slough of soft mud, to the verandah once more; but she did not take up her sewing again, going instead to where the harmonium

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stood in a corner of the hut, carefully swathed in canvas cloths, to protect it from the damp.

Sitting down before it, she began to play, choosing hymns in the Sindhi tongue, that any chance auditors whom she might have, should understand the words she sang. Susette came to join her presently, and then Mrs. Blake appeared to blend her voice with theirs; but the missionary had slipped quietly away, and did not return until after sundown, by which time it had begun to rain again, and the whole atmosphere reeked with hot moisture, as if five thousand bronchitis kettles were all steaming away at once.

No one had much appetite for supper; Mrs. Blake was feeling unwell; Susette was languid and peevish; Coralie thinking of her new friend, Amrita; whilst Mr. Blake was labouring under a state of great, though suppressed excitement.

It was not until the next day, however, that he spoke of it; and then it was Coralie, and not his wife, whom he took into his confidence. Mrs. Blake was still too unwell to be worried; and it was a custom in that household, to spare the mother all possible burdens.

"You saw those bales of cotton goods, woollen stuffs, and the like, that were left by the *Lucy Jane?*" he asked, in a low tone. They were walking close together under the missionary's big umbrella; and up there, on the crown of the ridge, eaves-

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dropping by undesirable persons was manifestly impossible.

"Yes, father," she answered, a quick look up into his grave face causing her heart to beat a little faster, with some indefinable anxiety.

"They were very peculiar cotton goods, very," he replied, grimly.

"What were they?" she demanded, her breath coming quickly now, in short hard pants, as if she had been running.

"Rifles, Lee-Metford's, and Winchesters; some of the bales would be ammunition, doubtless, but those I did not see, the rifles I did," he said, gloomily.

Still she failed to understand why this discovery should make him so melancholy, and ventured to hazard another question,—"Why should the Rao want so many rifles? Is it to make fresh raids on prosperous villages, as he did at Shankoash?"

"No, no, you don't understand, child," he retorted, hastily. "This is a case of smuggling arms into the country, right under the eyes of the Government, too, only they are too blind to see it. The Rao is only an agent in this matter, I suspect, and there are other, and more powerful potentates behind him. He receives the goods, as we have seen, and despatches them here and there, according to the requirements of his customers,—retaining only sufficient to keep his own warriors well supplied with arms and ammunition. The stores must have

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been getting rather low before the arrival of the *Lucy Jane* the other day, I fancy, for most of the men had new rifles served out to them yesterday, and were popping away at the target, as busy as bees."

Coralie understood now. "And it was target practice, that firing we heard yesterday?"

Mr. Blake nodded his head, and went on. "I should not wonder—though, mind you, child, this is speculation pure and simple—but that some of that cargo is intended to travel as far as the northern frontier, or to supply the Jandols, and the Chitralese with weapons. It has often been the subject of surprised comment, that the enemies on the frontier are so well supplied with up-to-date rifles of British make. This matter of the *Lucy Jane* solves the enigma easily enough, making it very plain that there are traitors in the camp; and that the worst foes the Government has, are to be found among her own children at home, who, from lust of gain, are playing a Judas part."

"What will you do, father?" Coralie asked, in an awed tone.

"My duty, I trust, however hard it may prove to be. But I see no light yet, and for a time, my Coralie, we can only wait—wait, and pray that the light may come.

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CHAPTER V.

FOR QUEEN AND COUNTRY.

MIR ALEFFO'S men were unusually busy in the weeks that followed, consequently there was no one to look after the European prisoners, who went where they liked, and did as they pleased, within the limits of the unflooded land.

Coralie held long conversations with Amrita at the hole in the wall, which interviews were afterwards conducted within the outer court of the women's apartments, and this by order of Mir Aleffo himself, who was not disposed to deny his daughter any reasonable gratification, upon which she had set her heart. And since she appeared to have set her heart on talking to the pale-faced magician who brought music out of a box, well, so be it.

Coralie's visits to Amrita were always paid alone, for Susette had fallen down and sprained her foot, which, though not a serious hurt, so far incapacitated her from the exertion needed to walk up the hill, and through the long passages to the court of the women, whilst Mrs. Blake had a shivering horror

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of entering the place at all, and was only half satisfied that Coralie should go.

The one thing that induced her to yield a reluctant consent was the fact, which was never by any chance possibility overlooked in the Blake household, namely, that it might make an opening for missionary work, and that the visits thus paid, would, in all probability, lead to the betterment of the condition of the poor creatures doomed to perpetual imprisonment within four walls.

Not that the ladies of Mir Aleffo's household desired any improvement in the conditions of their daily lives, for a more satisfied, and self-complacent set of women it would be hard to find anywhere—always excepting Amrita—who fretted and fumed, and was always wishing she had been a boy, so that all the world might have been open to her feet, that were so eager and willing to wander.

She was the Rao's only child, a fact that was passing strange, seeing that he had seven wives. Her mother was dead—had died in giving her birth—hence her name Amrita, which, signifying the water of immortality, was supposed to imply that, as her mother had died in giving her birth, so she herself would die if a child were born to her; the popular superstition being, that some people were merely the vehicles for the transmission of life,—that is, they might enjoy it for a time, and then pass it on to someone else.

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So Amrita, although some months older than Coralie, had never been betrothed, for her father loved her well, despite the fact that she was only a girl—a domestic calamity—and not the son which he had asked of the gods.

All this, and more, Amrita confided to Coralie, as the two girls sat side by side under the thatched shelter in the women's court, and stared at each other with the undisguised curiosity of their kind. Their dress, their manners, their speech, even the difference in complexion, hair, and eyes, were all so much material for discussion; and it would be hard to say which girl enjoyed it most.

True, Coralie's clothes were almost in rags, and their European form much modified by the exigencies of poverty and climate; besides being frightfully old-fashioned withal. But to Amrita the novelty of their shape was delightful; and she peeped and peered into the mysteries of hooks and eyes, buttons and button-holes, with an enjoyment that was purely feminine; whilst Coralie, on her part, was equally interested by Amrita's red velvet gaj, or spencer, which showed so effectively the flowing muslin garments worn beneath. Coralie even declared that nothing could be more gorgeous than the wide trousers of blue satin, with their naro, or trouser string of twisted silk and gold, plentifully adorned with pearls and rubies.

The only thing the English girl really objected

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to in the magnificent apparelling of the Rao's daughter, was the want of cleanliness, which, in view of the abundance of water in the neighbourhood, was really reprehensible.

Thus, when Amrita spread out her slender brown hands, that her new friend might admire the gems with which they were adorned, Coralie would shrink in disgust at the dirt with which they were grimed.

"Why don't you wash your hands, wash them often, ten times a day?" she demanded, in a severe tone, holding up her own palms, brown like the other's from sun and wind, yet immaculately clean and wholesome.

"But see, the henna would wash from the nails and palms; and the women, my father's wives, would make a mock at me!" and she flung up her exceedingly dirty hands with a flourish.

But the young reformer was quite merciless in her zeal for cleanliness. "Never mind what they say, wash your hands, and see how cool and fresh they feel; don't stain them with that dirty henna either, I can't bear it, ugh!" and Coralie shrugged her shoulders in great scorn and loathing.

Amrita, however, had her own theories of the subject, and stuck to them resolutely. "I shall not wash my hands, I like them so," she retorted, with the dogged obstinacy that she inherited from the Rao, her father.

"Very well," and Coralie rose to her feet with

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an air of great decision. "You can do as you please, of course, for are you not Mir Aleffo's daughter, and I the child of a captive? But I will not stay here to talk to you, unless you will consent to be clean;" and shaking the dust of the Rao's house from her feet, or more correctly speaking, scraping the dirt from her shoes, for the rain was falling fast, and there were puddles everywhere, Coralie went home, and for a time visited Amrita no more.

Meanwhile, the monsoon from the north-east had spent itself, and the south-west monsoon was running its course, bringing more rain, dense fog masses, and raging hurricanes, to blow, and tear, and devastate, until it seemed almost as if the little colony on the ridge would be blown off into the watery reaches beyond, by sheer force of the tempest.

No rifle practice was possible at this time, but the fighting part of Mir Aleffo's band were busy enough in other ways; and the captive missionary grew every day more sick at heart, as he realised where all this activity was tending.

Boats came and went; messages were sent and delivered; and despite the isolation of inundation, the robber Rao seemed fairly swamped with business.

Slowly, but surely, it was revealed to John Blake that some big plan of insurrection was to the fore, and piecing together the hints dropped in his hearing, as he went to and fro among the warriors of

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the ridge, he made out that Mir Aleffo was the acting agent for the federated chiefs of the frontier, who were planning an insurrection against the British Government, which, for magnitude and extent, should far surpass any previous attempts towards the overthrow of the Anglo-Saxon Empire in the East.

The chief difficulty to this plan heretofore, had been the smuggling of arms and ammunition in sufficient bulk for the occasion. This obstacle had at last been surmounted by bringing ships up the Rasputya waterway at flood time, and depositing the cargoes on the ridge; whence, by means of boats and camels, their further transport into the interior could easily be arranged. There was an agent in London of course, and another in busy Birmingham, whence the weapons came. A firm of shipowners, on the verge of bankruptcy, had been set on their financial feet again, with the understanding that they must liquidate their indebtedness by keeping their eyes shut to the transactions of the ammunition-agents; and so the scheme had worked all too successfully, until the conspirators were beginning to pass the word along that the time was growing ripe for action.

It was when he had discovered all this, that the missionary saw his own way clear before him; and having once seen it, hesitated not at all by reason of the difficulties standing in the path before him.

His duty to the heathen was one thing, and,

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as far as in him lay, he had discharged it faithfully enough. But over and before that, even, came his duty to his Queen and country; and in the interest of loyalty, it behoved him to warn the Government of the plot that was being hatched against it.

True, the attempt to give the warning might have a fatal ending for himself, and the tidings of impending revolt miscarry as well, but that made no difference to the course he had to pursue. God held the issues of life, and of death, in His own hands; His servants had but to do their part well, and leave the rest to Him.

"Coralie, come and walk with me on the ridge; it will do you good," he said to his eldest daughter one day, seeing she had a cloud on her face, that might develop into a frown later on.

She rose listlessly, the world was not going pleasantly with her just then, a monitor within was whispering persistently that her method of winning Amrita to cleanliness had been neither kind nor wise; joined to which, Susette was peevish and cross, and her mother worried and unwell, a state of things sufficient to render anyone's mental horizon dun-coloured and gloomy.

"Coralie, you are almost a woman now," said Mr. Blake in impressive tones, when the top of the ridge was reached, and they were pacing slowly along on the high ground, with the watery wastes outspread below on either side.

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"Am I?" she asked, dolefully, thinking that she would rather not be a woman just yet, if she could avoid it, since maturer age must surely bring heavier responsibilities, and of these she had enough and to spare already.

"I think so, I hope so,—for, my child, there is a hard bit of life's pathway looming near at hand for you, and I would like to be sure that your feet are strong enough for its rough places," he replied, laying a firm hand on her shoulder, and smiling down into her perturbed face, with his kind re-assuring smile.

"Is mother worse, are you afraid?" she asked, her heart beating quicker with dread, lest the shadow of death might be hovering over their little household.

"No, no; your mother is not well, her nerves are badly shaken by all we have gone through, and the discomforts of her life here in Rasputya are trying, too; but beyond that, I do not think there is anything to fear on her account."

"Then what is it? Tell me, father, quick," she implored, seeing how grave his eyes were, though his face smiled all the time.

He plunged into the story of what he had discovered, relating how he had heard a bit here, and another fragment there, and piecing the whole together, found out the main details of the plot that was being developed for the discomfiture and over-

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throw of the Government, with the massacre, doubtless, of many innocent lives.

"Can nothing be done to stop it?" she asked, her face quivering with horror at the danger impending.

"I am going to try what I can do to warn the Government," he answered, firmly.

"You, father? But Mir Aleffo will not permit you to leave the ridge," she retorted quickly, wondering if he had forgotten the fact of his captivity.

Mr. Blake smiled. "Even Mir Aleffo is not omnipotent, Coralie, though I admit he is not a personage to be despised, by any means."

"He is horrid!" she exclaimed, vehemently.

"Listen, child," went on Mr. Blake, in a solemn tone, "if I am to do this thing successfully, Mir Aleffo must think me dead. I must be dead to everyone—to your mother, and Susette, too—only you will know why I have disappeared, and that I am still in life. It is a great trust, Coralie, can you live up to it, do you think?"

She lifted her face, blanched and terrified to his, only her eyes did not shrink or falter. "Father, I will try."

"That is spoken like my own brave, little daughter," he said, kindly patting in encouraging fashion the shoulder upon which his hand still rested. "And see here, Coralie, you must be very careful, for it is not only my life that you will hold in your

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discretion, but those of your mother and sister, and your own also; for if by any means it should leak out that I was trying to escape, in order to warn the Government, the Rao would at once institute an active pursuit, at the same time putting the rest of you to the most cruel death his ingenuity could devise."

"Yes, father," answered Coralie, in a low tone, keeping her voice steady by a great effort.

"I shall not go yet,—not until the waters begin to sink a little,—and I shall not warn you either, dear," he went on, his tone gentle and pitying, for well he knew the anguish he was bringing into her daily life, and the terrible dread and apprehension that must be her portion henceforth. "Indeed, after to-day, we will not speak of it again, lest haply some listening ear might catch a word, and the whole thing fall through."

"But how can you get away?" she whispered, though up here on the high exposed ground of the ridge such caution was entirely unnecessary.

He shook his head. "That I cannot tell; I am a good swimmer, you know, and if I can get clear away with no one on my track, I can swim to one of the lesser ridges, and help myself to a boat, after which it will be easy work to get lost on the Rann, and paddle as quickly as I can to the nearest place, from whence a warning may be sent. But even then, Coralie, I must not declare myself

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for who I am, lest haply vengeance fall on you innocent ones here, before succour can reach you. So I shall call myself by a different name, and concoct for myself a fictitious environment of details, and it may be months, and months before we are re-united again,—though, in God's good time, and through His good pleasure, it will come about at last. Meanwhile, this one fact I want to impress upon you, and that is, you must not believe me dead, unless, with your own eyes, you look on my corpse."

"Father, I promise," she faltered, in broken, tearful accents.

"It is a compact then, Coralie. You may, by some strange circumstances be rescued first, and then you search for me. Whilst I, when my duty to my Queen and country is done, make all speed to rescue you, your mother, and Susette."

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CHAPTER VI.

FORESHADOWINGS.

THE weather was steadily improving, the dense masses of vapour were drifting away, and the soaked and drenched Rasputya ridge began to show signs of drying up.

But Mrs. Blake's health did not improve with the weather,—indeed, she seemed to grow worse day by day, and Susette remained ailing too, so that Coralie's hands were very full in the time that followed her father's disclosure of the project he had in view.

One day a messenger arrived, bearing a peace-offering from Amrita, in the shape of a great jar of honey, and a flat basket piled high with citrons, dates, and tender figs. These gifts the bearer placed on the floor of the hut, and fumbling in the folds of her outer garment, produced two fragments of cotton cloth, one foul and unpleasant to look at, the other fresh and clean.

"Amrita like that one day," said the woman, who was short, thick-set, and very dark as to skin. She had come close to Coralie, and was holding the dirty rag up for her inspection.

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"I see," responded the girl, with a nod of the head, and guessing what was coming next.

"But Amrita like this now," chuckled the ambassadress, suddenly flourishing the clean rag in Coralie's face. "Come, see Amrita now, white music-maker."

"Yes, I will come now," responded Coralie, secretly thankful for this opportunity of reconciliation, and openly grateful for the gifts of fruit and honey, that had come from the women's quarter, knowing well how pleased her invalids would be with such luxurious additions to their coarse and monotonous daily fare.

The messenger chuckled again, making a clucking sound with her lips in token of her approval, and picking up her emptied basket, waited for Coralie to accompany her.

Mrs. Blake was sleeping, but with a harassed weary frown on her face, as though even slumber was not rest for her, and Susette was languidly arranging coloured shells, that her father had brought her, forming with them the words of a Bible text in the Sindhi tongue, on a wide flat tray, covered with soft clay. It would dry hard, when exposed to the sunshine, and was one way of propagating Scripture truths, when books and writing materials were scarce, and hard to come by.

Mr. Blake was away with the Rao's mohanas (fishermen) that day; for to sit idly down in the

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endurance of his captivity was not possible to a man of his nature; therefore he did such work as came to his hand, endeavouring to get as much knowledge of the submerged country as it was possible to obtain. With her father away, Coralie was a little doubtful about the expediency of an immediate visit to Amrita, but Susette declared herself equal to any emergency that might arise, and, re-assured on this score, the other straightened her shabby frock, and with a shake of her head to settle her rather refractory hair, declared herself ready to start.

Away went the black woman at a swinging pace up the steep slope, whilst Coralie panted after her. Entering by the usual gate, and diving down alleys, winding and tortuous, the two stumbled against a gaunt, lean man, with an evil sinister face, and a straggling grey beard. The black woman shrank from him as if in fear, and Coralie stared into his face, wondering who he was, that her companion should be so manifestly disconcerted by the encounter.

He was dirty and ragged, as most of the men of Rasputya were, and there was nothing about him, except perhaps his apparent age, to differentiate him from other people.

"Who was that?" she asked, when he was out of earshot, thinking that it might be the Brahmin priest, Mahandra, whom she had heard of, but never seen.

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"It is Mir Aleffo," replied the black woman, clucking with her lips again, but this time in consternation. "It is Mir Aleffo, the great one, and I with my common flesh did bump against his person; alas, that I ever was born!"

"Was that Mir Aleffo? that dirty old man!" cried Coralie, the irreverent one. Despite her many weeks of residence on the ridge she had never been face to face with the Rao before, and, judging from the greatness of his reputation, had expected to see a very magnificent individual indeed, and one as different as possible from the lean, dirty man, against whom she had just bumped.

The black woman held up her hands with a gesture of horror. "Ah, speak not so disdainfully of the mighty warrior Mir Aleffo, maiden-of-the-strange-nation, lest when the asses return again, he shalt make of thy life a spoil for the night-howling jackal!" she retorted, raising her voice to an ominous croak.

But Coralie only laughed, never dreaming in her ignorance that a fate even worse than this might menace her ere long.

Amrita was delighted to see her, and proudly displayed a pair of clean hands for her friend to admire, even going so far as to admit that they did feel more comfortable; and that she thought it probable that she should extend her ablutions so far as to include her face, in course of time.

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And Coralie, made wise by experience, applauded the good already done, and forbore to urge on extreme measures, or even to complain of the exceeding dirtiness of Amrita's garments, which were lamentably in need of the cleansing process.

The Rao's daughter chattered away like a magpie, her tongue going all the faster because of the lapse of time since she had last beheld her friend; and after a while she began to wax confidential.

"Do you know what Ratnawati told me yesterday?" she asked, presently, sinking her voice to a low, mysterious whisper.

"I don't even know who Ratnawati is," retorted Coralie, with a laugh.

"That was Ratnawati who brought you here today," replied Amrita, with a quick movement of her feet, that set a-chiming all the little bells which were fixed to the bangles adorning her slender brown ankles. She is my nurse, who cared for me when my mother died; it is she who protects me from the kicks and cuffs of my father's wives, though she slaps me in the face when I call her names, or spit at her."

"I think I should do the same in Ratnawati's place," Coralie said, with a laugh, and then asked for the news which the other was burning to disclose.

"My father is going to have a new wife, and they don't know it yet," whispered Amrita, with a gleeful laugh, nodding her head in the direction of

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the apartment where Mir Aleffo's already numerous spouses were engaged in the preparation of the great man's supper.

Coralie looked aghast. "But he has so many now!" she exclaimed, in a tone of expostulation, almost as if she had been arguing with the much-married man himself, instead of merely discussing the fact with his daughter.

"I know," and Amrita snorted contemptuously; "there are seven alive now, besides my mother, who is dead. But this new one is both wise and clever, Ratnawati says. She will not work at the quern,* or make cakes, but rest at ease on her divan, whilst the others do her bidding. Ah, but will it not be fun to see their faces, when she who is to reign shall order them here, and send them there?"

"Where is she coming from, and when?" asked Coralie, disdainful still, yet not without some natural curiosity concerning the advent and antecedents of the Rao's bride.

"Ratnawati does not know; it is hidden yet from the common tongue, this knowledge of my father's choice. Perhaps she will be brought in the next ship that brings guns from the country of Kaiser-i-Hind," the girl replied, innocently enough, and never dreaming that she was betraying her father by so doing.

"When will that be?" Coralie asked, bending

* A mill for grinding corn.

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her head, that Amrita might not see how red her face had become.

"In a day or two; I think the token of its coming was handed in yesterday," the Rao's daughter replied, and then chattered on of the wonderful things she was expecting,—the ribbons and charms that her father had promised should be brought to her in the very next vessel that voyaged the length of the Rasputya waterway; until at length Coralie rose, saying that she must return to her mother, who was sick.

Amrita pouted at this, being so well pleased at having her friend back again, as to find it hard to let her go. But Coralie was not to be coaxed or coerced into staying longer that day, and, escorted by Ratnawati, made her way out of the Rao's abode once more.

Her mother was awake when she reached their hut, and her father had returned, bringing with him some very fine fish, which the Rao's mohanas had given to him as payment for the share he had borne in their toil.

Coralie looked at the fish with a shiver of apprehension; rightly or wrongly, she had made up her mind that it was a part of her father's plan of escape, to disappear some day whilst out fishing; and never did he start on one of these expeditions than she bade him good-bye in her heart,—looking after him with sick fear, lest it might be for the last time.

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But she had to tell him the item of news about the arrival of the next vessel, which she had gleaned from the chattering Amrita—although she shrank from it with a very great reluctance—having an instinctive foreboding that it would but hasten the catastrophe that had to come.

He received the tidings in silence, and seeing the look in his face, she did not dare to question him, nor even to comment upon her information. Only, from that day forward, her fears were re-doubled, and each morning that dawned found her wondering if the sun, when it set, would leave her apparently fatherless.

Oh, it was hard to be patient, to trust and not be afraid. Little wonder that during those days of care and suspense, Coralie found that to do one's duty to the best of one's ability, was about the hardest task on the face of the earth.

Ratnawati found her way to the hut most days now, sometimes with messages from Amrita, or with presents of fruit or honey, and sometimes merely to squat upon the floor, in order to watch how the people-of-the-strange-nation went about the business of preparing food, and eating it after it was cooked.

She was very good to Mrs. Blake, bringing her native remedies for the lessening of the fever, and doing many a hard task as well, for which Coralie's arms proved incapable.

So the time passed on, until at length the missionary's plan was ripe for execution.

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CHAPTER VII.

DROWNED WHILST FISHING.

It was a day of dense fog, such as sometimes varied the downpour of the wet season at Rasputya, when great masses of fleecy sea-mist rolled in from the ocean, and hung over the salt marshes like a pall. The atmosphere was so damp, hot, and muggy, that it was like living in a vapour bath, and it caused the most energetic of people to become languid and inert.

Mrs. Blake and Susette were both prostrated by the weather, and lay all through the day almost without moving; but a curious unrest had taken possession of Coralie, who could hardly remain in one position five minutes at a stretch. Her father had gone out fishing with the Rao's mohanas that morning, and an intuitive knowledge had come to her that he would not return.

Near to the time when the sun should have set, if the fog had only lifted sufficiently to make that visible, she took up her position on the step of the little verandah before the door, and strained her ears for the tidings she expected, yet so much dreaded to hear,

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"Coralie, isn't it nearly time for father to come back?" asked Susette, in a weary, peevish voice; the climate of the marshes was proving very trying to her—being wearing alike to health and temper.

"It is almost sunset, I think, only the mist is so thick I can't tell," Coralie answered, peering into the white curtain that hovered so closely over the ridge that day. Other time-piece than the sun they did not now possess, for Mir Aleffo had annexed the watch of the captive missionary for his own use, and their clock had been left behind amid the ruins of Shankoash.

"Oh, dear, I hope he won't be long; I'm so afraid for him to be in a boat in this fog; he might be drowned!" sighed Susette in the same doleful tone.

Coralie shivered anew, and then her mother spoke for the first time. "Coralie, I wish you would run a little way up the ridge, to see if you can discover any tidings of the return of the fishermen; for, like Susette, I, too, am growing very nervous and uncomfortable, whilst the fog is certainly thicker; but do not go too far, dear child, lest you should fail to find your way back again."

Very reluctantly Coralie prepared to obey her mother's request. It was one thing to stay at home and wait for the bad news to come to her there, it was quite another to go up the ridge, and down the opposite slope, where the mohanas moored their boats, to learn it there. Yet, no thought of dis-

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obeying the injunction came to her, as she groped her way up the rough slope past Mir Aleffo's fortified abode, stumbling over loose rocks, and twice tumbling headlong into the jungle that skirted the opposite side of the path.

Then presently she grew bewildered, and a moment or two later, realised that she had lost her way, and did not know where she was.

Standing still, she listened for voices which might guide her, for she was off the path now, and floundering among the tangled creepers and luxuriant undergrowth that had sprung up so abundantly since the beginning of the rains.

But the thick mist, which obscured vision, must have deadened hearing likewise, since no sound reached her, although the ridge almost teemed with inhabitants, so many people having been driven by the unusually heavy inundation, to take up a temporary abode on the higher ground of the ridge.

In vain she turned and turned, groping here and there in the thick white mist; she could not even find the boundary wall of Mir Aleffo's house, or the path by which she had come up from the hut, whilst the thorns and briers of the jungle tore and scratched her flesh, until her anxiety grew into palpitating alarm.

She was lost! and that within sight of home, or what would have been in sight of home if only the sea-fog had not intervened. There were pre-

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cipitous places and dangerous ravines on this side of the ridge, and, remembering this, she crouched on the ground, resolved to wait until the mist should lift enough to enable her to find her way back to the hut once more, even though the waiting should extend into the next day.

At intervals she shouted at the topmost pitch of her voice, but no one seemed to hear, or to heed; and then a blacker tinge stole through the mist, and she knew the night had come.

Wet with the clinging fog, and chilled through with fear, Coralie crouched closer on the ground, and sobbed in dull misery of heart. Something cold and slimy glided over her hand as it rested on the ground, and, guessing it to be a snake, she sprang up, shrieking aloud in terror and dismay.

It was quite dark now. But away right in front of her, at her feet almost, she could distinguish a dull, red glow, and the sight rekindled the hope that had been nearly extinguished in her heart. She knew that the red glow came from the smashana (the plot of ground where the bodies of those who had died were burned), and if she could manage to reach that light she could find her way home by a well-beaten track, or chance upon some friendly soul who would guide her thither.

Saving, perhaps, Mir Aleffo himself and the Brahmin priest, Mahandra, she had no fear of any of the people dwelling upon the ridge, for, thanks to the

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harmonium, and the music she was able to bring out of it, there was not a man, woman, or child in all the place who would not have cheerfully fallen down and worshipped her.

Groping her way painfully along, torn by briers, harassed by fear of snakes, she arrived in time at the low mud wall enclosing the place of the dead, and commenced groping along its length until she should reach the gate of entrance. The distant howl of a jackal smote upon her ear, causing her to shiver anew, and hasten her steps, lest haply she might be overtaken by some of these night-marauding scavengers, who regularly visited the smashana to feast upon the half-burned bodies of the Rasputya dead.

No such gruesome fate overtook her, however, and, reaching the gate at last, she was able to grope her way by the aid of friendly landmarks, until she reached once more the door of the hut that for the nonce was home.

Confused and weary as she was, the full significance of the wailing from within did not immediately strike her. She thought her mother and Susette were weeping over her delayed return, and, hurrying across the little strip of verandah, hastened to assure them of her safe return.

But Mrs. Blake and Susette, wrapped in each other's embrace, scarcely heeded when she spoke to them; and, seeing how absorbed by grief they were,

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it came to her like a flash that the worst had happened.

"Oh, tell me," she cried, catching her voice in a gasp of fear, "what is the matter, and why you are crying?"

Ratnawati was in the hut, standing with one or two other women, as if she had come to sympathise; and despairing of getting an answer from her mother or sister, Coralie turned to the black woman.

"What is it, can't you speak?" she cried, stamping one foot on the ground in the extremity of her apprehension.

"The great sahib-father, him drowned while fishing," blurted out the black woman, with a groan at being compelled to impart tidings so disastrous; for, on the Rasputya ridge, it was considered bad luck to be the bearer of bad news.

Coralie sat down suddenly on the nearest bench, with a sensation of choking in her throat, and at her heart the sharp pain of bereavement. It had come at last, that which she had dreaded so much, and in the first anguish she felt that it would have been easier to see him die, and to know that no further peril or suffering would be his.

He might be drowned in reality, whilst endeavouring to escape, or get lost, and starve to death in the desert. He might even be taken prisoner, and brought back to the ridge to be tortured and slain. And oppressed by these terrors of what might be,

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Coralie's head dropped upon her hands, and she burst into a passion of pitiful weeping.

"Coralie, Coralie, come here to me, my child, we will comfort each other," said Mrs. Blake, rousing from her own grief in the endeavour to console her daughter. And Coralie, creeping to the shelter of her mother's arm, wept there, and was comforted.

Ratnawati stayed with them all through that night, driving the other women away, after a time, with shrill scoldings, and an active menace of fists; but her voice dropped to a softer key when she spoke to the sorrowing lady and her children.

Before the sun rose, to disperse some at least of the thick fog next day, Mrs. Blake was very seriously ill. The shock of hearing that her husband had been drowned, coming upon her so quickly after her recent attack of fever, brought with it a relapse, and by the time the dawning came, she was unconscious, and babbling incoherences of the days when she was young, and John Blake was her betrothed.

Coralie was plainly not capable of nursing her mother without help; and Susette was sick with crying and fright combined. So, muttering to herself, in a half-savage, half-satisfied tone, Ratnawati made an abrupt departure from the hut before the sun was one hour high.

Coralie watched her go, with a great inward shrinking. She knew so little of sickness herself that the

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black woman had seemed a tower of strength whilst she stayed.

Mrs. Blake was still muttering confusedly, and Susette crept closer to her elder sister for protection; her delirious mother seemed to her no mother at all, but a being to be feared.

Half-an-hour had hardly passed before the black woman re-appeared, laden now with various bags, bundles, and jars, which she promptly bestowed in various quarters of the hut, and then cautiously approached the invalid, as if afraid of disturbing her.

"Ratnawati come to stay, she take care of missi and poor sick mem," she said, softly.

"Oh, can you stay? Did Amrita say that you might?" Coralie asked, with an air of profound relief. A moment before, with the responsibility of the care of her mother resting upon her, life had seemed too hard to be lived. Now, with the burden lifted, all things were possible; she could even believe that her father would succeed in his perilous task, and that they would all be united again some day in the not very distant future.

"Amrita, she not be asked. Ratnawati go straight to Mir Aleffo. He mighty man of valour," and the black woman laughed and nodded her head, chuckling with great satisfaction over some secret knowledge of her own that was hidden safely away from other people in that woolly, greasy pow of hers.

Coralie laughed too. She really could not help it,

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despite the heavy cares and the sorrow which just then overshadowed her life. "I don't see what valour has to do with it, but I am very glad you have come to stay," she answered, whereat Ratnawati laughed and chuckled again, as if it was all very good fun indeed. Then she bent over Mrs. Blake, and, lifting the poor lady in her arms, drew her into a more comfortable position.

"Coralie, how could you laugh?" cried Susette, in a shocked tone.

Coralie had a sudden twinge of conscience, because of her momentary lapse into merriment. That she did not believe her father to have been drowned was no excuse for levity of behaviour at the present moment, and her tone was penitent enough to pacify Susette, as she said, softly, "I know it was dreadfully bad of me, but then I laugh so easily, even though the next minute I'm as sorry as sorry can be."

"Poor dear father, I can't bear to think of him dead in the water, to be eaten perhaps by an alligator," and Susette's tears gushed forth afresh.

Coralie caught her breath with a sob, for the words opened up a new possibility, and a very dreadful one; her father might be menaced by alligators in his flight, in which case his chances of escape would be very small indeed. But she steadied her voice by an effort, so that her sister should not guess at the fear and anxiety behind.

"It doesn't hurt when one is dead, you know,

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Susette, and I think I'd just as soon be eaten by alligators as be crawled over by worms, ugh!" and she shuddered in strong disgust at the mere thought.

"I wish they could have found his body," went on Susette, in a plaintive tone.

"Did they look for it?" demanded the other in a sharp tone; the night had been too full of misery for her to have had time to learn all the details of the supposed disaster.

"Yes, didn't you know?" and Susette looked at her sister in astonishment.

"How should I, when I was up on the ridge, lost in the fog?" cried Coralie, impatiently. She was clasping her hands in an anguish of distress now, wondering if the search was being still carried on, and what would be the result if he was discovered alive.

"The mohanas were not fishing from boats yesterday, because of the fog, but were right out on the rocky tail of the ridge, beyond the cleft, wading out with nets, and catching the fish in the little pools and creeks between the rocks, when father, who was climbing over a great boulder, slipped, and disappeared in the water," explained Susette, breaking down in tears again, over the mental picture of the tragedy that she had conjured up,—the great rock boulder, the thick curtain of white mist, and her father's head disappearing under the green water of the flooded marsh.

Coralie felt increasingly troubled. Her father was

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a good swimmer, she knew, but then there were the alligators to reckon with, and besides all this, there was the difficulty of obtaining food, of securing a boat, and chiefest of all, of steering it so that he might escape observation when the fog should lift.

Susette went to sleep after a time; and even Mrs. Blake ceased to toss and moan,—lying still, in the quiet of exhaustion. But there was no sleep for Coralie yet, as she crouched on the floor of the hut, and thought the situation round and round, yet gaining nothing from the process, saving a bigger heartache.

"Missi no have fear; him, Mir Aleffo, take care of poor lone white people," muttered Ratnawati in the pauses of her ministrations to the invalid.

"If it had not been for Mir Aleffo we should never have been dragged away from Shankoash, and this trouble could not have come!" burst out Coralie, in a blaze of resentment against the robber Rao.

But Ratnawati only chuckled and laughed, nodding that greasy head of hers the while, with a sage assumption of wisdom that would have been extremely diverting at any other time.

"Him a great man of valour. Him cut off Ratnawati's head, and fling her body to the jackals unburned, if she no do as he tells her. Him, Mir Aleffo, a very great chief indeed!" she exclaimed in a burst of ecstatic admiration, and then was silent, as though absorbed in meditation anent the virtues and prowess of the ruler of her tribe.

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CHAPTER VIII.

IN PERILS OFT.

MEANWHILE where was the missionary? He had carefully planned the time of his going; had taken that morning a mental farewell of his wife and daughters when he left the hut to join the mohanas at their work, and had watched all through the morning for an opportunity to make his most desperate venture.

The fog brooded over the water even more densely than over the higher ground of the ridge; no object was visible three yards away, and seizing his chance, when perched on a slippery boulder a little distance from his companions, with a great cry John Blake plunged into the sea.

To slip away from Mir Aleffo's mohanas in the fog had been easy enough, and he had added to this good fortune by finding a small boat moored amid the sandstones, which, appropriating, he entered, and rowed away, steering his course by a tiny pocket-compass he carried tied round his neck by a string, and careful always to keep his boat headed to the south-west.

When night fell he landed on a sandbank, and,

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drawing up his boat, laid down to slumber, first committing himself to the care of the Eye that never sleeps.

Wet, cold, and hungry as he was, he yet slumbered as peacefully as a child that is cradled in comfort, only waking when the sun rose, and sitting up to rub his eyes and wonder where he was.

But with the dawning the fog had lifted, and the first sight that greeted his waking gaze was a vessel in the offing, heading a course for the ridge of Rasputya. To hide himself and his boat was a natural impulse, since he guessed this vessel to be like the *Lucy Jane*, laden with a cargo of contraband arms and ammunition.

Slowly, slowly the ship grew to his sight; there was a good breeze, but, owing to the flooded condition of the country, it was evidently difficult to find the channel of the deep Rasputya water-way.

The fugitive had hidden his boat by the simple means of burying it in the sand, and, concealing himself among the scattered boulders, prepared to lie low until the vessel should be out of sight.

Night was falling before the barque dropped below the horizon, and by that time it was too late to voyage further that day. So, supping frugally on a handful of fish he had been so fortunate as to catch during his long hours of waiting, John Blake lay down to spend his second night in the wilderness.

But now his sleep was broken by hideous visions

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and dreams, terrible beyond the telling; each time, too, that he chanced to awake, he heard distinctly a human voice, that yet was not speech, calling and crying in wordless incoherencies of petition and appeal.

Morning came, with tardy feet and slow; rising from his lair among the sand-boulders, with the first light of dawn, Mr. Blake strained his gaze long and anxiously in the direction from which the sounds had come.

Right away over the flooded landscape, where a sand ridge showed dim outlines against the sky, he saw something fluttering; a flag it might be, or a garment hung up to serve as such. For a short time he hesitated about going to see what it was, being still too near Mir Aleffo's ridge to make encounter with natives either safe or pleasant. But in the end humanity, intermixed perhaps with curiosity, got the better of his prudential scruples; and, unearthing his boat from the soft sand, he stepped boldly into it, and rowed down the water-way towards where that fluttering rag waved its signal of distress.

The sun was high in the heavens before he reached the place, and then to his amazement he saw a white man—a sailor—lying stretched on the sand, close to the stick stuck in the ground, to which he had tied his shirt.

This spit, or ridge of sand, on which the man was lying, formed the bank of the water-way, and

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the channel beside it was very deep, with a swift current setting towards Mir Aleffo's domain. Perhaps, in his surprise, John Blake was careless, or it might have been an accident pure and simple, but it so happened, that, as his boat drove against the sandy ridge, and he rose from his seat to spring out, he stumbled, falling headlong on to the shore.

In a moment he had recovered himself, regained his feet, and turned to draw his boat up beyond the reach of the tide; but that moment was too late, and the little boat was already drifting on the bosom of the fierce current.

Good swimmer though he was, he hesitated about trusting himself to the mercy of that rapidly running river, in his present worn and exhausted condition; and whilst he hesitated, the boat drifted further and further, until it had gone beyond his power to recover.

A sensation of despair swept over him, and he shouted aloud in the agony of his mind, forgetting that God was over all, and able to turn the disasters of men into their greatest blessings, forgetting aught save the fact that the boat—his one chance of escape—was lost to him.

But his despair gave place to resignation, as, remembering to whose service he was vowed, he strove—and not in vain—for calm composure once more.

Meanwhile, the prostrate figure on the ground

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gave no sign of life, saving his heavy breathing; and, bending over him, John Blake judged him to be very ill; or in some kind of a fit or swoon.

Then he was surprised, almost startled, to see how like the man on the ground was to himself,—the same complexion, eyes of a similar colour, and height and build of a proportion equal to his own.

All these details were gathered, as it were, in a flash, the while he was chafing the hands of the unconscious man, and endeavouring, by such means as were in his power, of recovering him from his swoon.

The poor fellow opened his eyes at length, or rather, sense returned to them; for they had been fixed, not closed by his swoon. He was tremendously amazed at the sight of Mr. Blake—displaying at first unmistakeable terror and fright. He did not speak, however; and it soon became plain to the other that he was dumb, and so deaf, that the loudest shouting had no effect upon him.

For a moment the missionary was nonplussed; then, remembering an accomplishment of his boyhood—the art of talking with his fingers—he essayed its effect upon this forlorn stranger; and was delighted to find that the poor fellow understood, and was able to answer back in the same fashion.

His story was a curious one, and proved another link in the chain of conspiracy, which the missionary was risking his life to expose. He was a Swede by nationality, an Englishman by birth and up-

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bringing, and an able-bodied seaman aboard the *Shooting Star*, the vessel which the day before had passed along the water-way. He had sailed with Captain Bowles, the master, two voyages before; and had gathered from those experiences that the trade carried on was not so straight as could be desired; then the captain grew suspicious of him—sending him out of the way when there was anything out of the common going on; and, upon one occasion, imprisoning him in the hold for three or four days, without giving him any reason for so doing.

This time, however, it had been no question of the hold—that being crammed already with the contraband of war—so the captain had ordered a boat to be lowered, a bag of biscuits flung into it; and, with only this slender provision between him and starvation, had bade the men row the Swede to the nearest sand ridge, and leave him there until their return.

But the afflicted sailor had a most intense horror of being left alone. He had, moreover, grave doubts as to whether Captain Bowles would take the trouble to look for him upon his return from Rasputya; and the doubt and the horror combined, had flung him into a panic of terror, which worked speedy havoc on a frame already weakened by disease, and hard, perhaps riotous, living.

For two days and nights Mr. Blake ministered to the necessities of the sick man, whilst a pouring

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rain beat with merciless fury upon them, and a slow starvation stared them in the face.

On the morning of the third day, the dumb sailor died, and Mr. Blake formed the hazardous project of personating the dead man, and thus getting a chance of being taken on board the *Shooting Star*, when that craft should re-appear on her return voyage down the water-way, from the country of Mir Aleffo.

It was a daring scheme, involving great risks; but seeing that the alternative was starvation, there seemed nothing for it but to incur the risk.

Therefore he changed clothes with the dead man, and was comforted beyond measure to find how nearly of a size they were. It was greatly in his favour that the deceased had been deaf and dumb, since he could be deaf and dumb likewise, and thus escape shoals and quicksands of conversation. The Swede had been known aboard the *Shooting Star* as the "Poll Parrot," because of the inarticulate piercing cries in which he indulged when frightened or offended. It was these cries that had so much disturbed Mr. Blake during his second night on the sandbank, but the remembrance of them would prove useful in his personation of the dead man, should occasion arise, when it might appear expedient to give vent to similar emotions.

Dressing poor Poll Parrot in his own garments, the missionary then committed the body to the deep channel of the water-way.

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He then repeated over it such portions of the burial service as seemed fitting to the occasion, and again commended himself and his perilous undertaking to the Almighty, after which he waited, in mingled hope and apprehension, for the return of the vessel called the *Shooting Star*.

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CHAPTER IX.

THE GREY BEARD A-WOOING.

MIR ALEFFO was as good as his word, regarding his statement that he would take care of the lone white people, who had been brought as captives to his domains.

Everything in the way of luxury that the ridge could supply was brought for the use of the invalid; whilst Ratnawati remained in close, unremitting attendance upon her, thus leaving Coralie free to come and go as she would.

One command the Rao issued, which she rather resented—even whilst she obeyed—and that was to invoke the "spirit of the box" every evening before sunset, when the men and women who had been abroad since the dawning returned from their toil. Coralie had been quite willing to play and sing to the Rasputyans prior to her father's disappearance, and her mother's sickness. But now, in the face of all this tribulation, she was by no means disposed to live her daily life as if nothing worse than captivity was to the fore.

For the same reason she declined to pay any

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more visits to Amrita; and although that young lady sent sundry and divers messages, both imploring and didactic in tone, she steadily adhered to her resolution, and remained closely in attendance upon her mother.

Mrs. Blake was very ill. There were three or four dreadful days when it seemed as if she must die; and it was then that Coralie's lot was so especially hard to bear. Instinct and reason told her that her mother was sinking for want of a hope strong enough to keep her in life; and having it in her own power to give the sufferer this hope, it was hard indeed to withhold her hand.

Many a battle with herself did she fight over the question of whether to tell or not; and sore was her perplexity concerning the path of duty now. If she told, and her mother recovered, then Mrs. Blake's life would be shadowed by a yet heavier burden of unrest and sorrow, only to end perhaps in the same despair which brooded over her at the present time.

If, on the other hand, she kept silence, and her mother died, what would become of herself and Susette, lonely orphans, captives in a strange land? The thought was more than she could bear; and when it came to oppress her, she could only clasp her hands and cry to the All-Father, whose children's faintest whisper of appeal is always heard: "Please God, help me to do what is right now; and take care of us always, Amen."

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The answer to that prayer came quickly, and Mrs. Blake began to recover rapidly, so that Coralie was fain to turn her petitions into heart-felt thanksgivings that her secret had been kept inviolate.

Even when Mrs. Blake grew better, and able to sit up for some part of each day, Ratnawati still lingered on; and a queer distrust of her motives sprung to life in Coralie's heart, causing her to watch the black woman closely. She believed that under the simple, kindly guise of the outer-woman was hidden a spy, who might even yet spoil the project for which the supposed dead missionary had risked, only not his own life, but the lives of those he held dearer than himself.

A spy of Mir Aleffo Ratnawati certainly was, but not in the sense which Coralie feared.

The second vessel had come and gone, during the time Mrs. Blake lay at the point of death. But neither Coralie nor Susette had known ought of its arrival or departure; nor had a guard been posted before the little hut, to hold its inmates in custody, as on the first occasion. But the event had made the Rao very busy for many days after, effectually diverting his mind, for a time, from another project closely concerning his white captives from Shankoash.

When the shipments had all been disposed of, however, and he found himself at leisure once more, the grey-bearded chieftain turned his attention to his own private and particular business again.

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He sent for Mahandra, the Brahmin priest of the ridge, who catered for the Rasputyans from a spiritual point of view; and who was, moreover, chaplain-in-ordinary to that man of valour, Mir Aleffo. A stormy scene ensued at that interview, which would have ended disastrously for Mahandra, but for his reluctant submission to the will of his chief, who forebore to slay him upon his promise of compliance with the wishes of his lord.

Mir Aleffo was thinking of taking a new wife, and desired the Brahmin to act as his wakileh, or matrimonial go-between. In an ordinary case a woman held this office, but the Rao's was not to be regarded as such, and when he had business to do, preferred it to be transacted by a man, and for choice, Mahandra, who was both wily and shrewd.

Doubtless the Brahmin would never have dreamed of raising an objection had the bride fixed upon been, in his estimation, a suitable person; but she was not, and Mahandra had ventured on a protest, which, so far from availing aught to prevent the Rao from committing such an indiscretion, had but endangered the neck of this conscientious objector.

A wakileh, whether male or female, is a very important personage in Rasputya, and is usually able to secure a good commission from the clients with whom the business is done. Mahandra, if he succeeded in carrying the business through, would doubtless be the richer from the transaction; but he

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had very strong opinions concerning right and wrong, and, according to his light, he lived up to them.

The Rao had commanded him to go to the hut where dwelt the captive strangers, and demand of Mrs. Blake the hand of her elder daughter in marriage, and it was against this the Brahmin so fiercely revolted.

Resistance, however, being plainly out of the question, Mahandra finally consented to undertake the commission, and proceeded to get himself up in the most approved manner, anointing his body, and clothing himself in robes of flowing white.

That the captive lady of the strange nation would have any objection to raise on her own score was entirely out of the question, neither Mir Aleffo nor his discomfited spiritual adviser deigning to give any heed to such an unimportant detail.

The day Mahandra chose for his ambassage was fine and warm, but not too hot for comfort. His arrival caused a flutter of surprise in the little household, not even Ratnawati having received any forewarning as to the time of his coming, though she was sufficiently well posted in the object of the visit.

Mrs. Blake, who was up and dressed, rose to receive him, with a quiet dignity that might have warned him of difficulties ahead had he not been too much wrapped up in the sense of his own importance to give any heed to it, as he squatted,

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with solemn deliberation, in the middle of the floor, and spread his robes about him.

It was etiquette for the person thus visited to ask the wakileh's object in coming, but, as Mrs. Blake did not take the initiative, there was nothing for it but that Mahandra should open the business unassisted, which he proceeded to do without further loss of time.

"Mir Aleffo is a great man, one renowned for valour and of great prowess," he said, in a tone that was both harsh and aggressive.

Mrs. Blake bowed coldly; privately she had no such great opinion of the Rao's valour, or his prowess either; she deemed his generosity to her during the time of her sickness to be nothing more than a latent fear lest she should hold him chargeable to the British Government for the tragedy of her husband's death — that is, supposing she ever succeeded in escaping from Rasputya to lodge the complaint.

"Mir Aleffo is young and comely, his grey beard being but the outward symbol of the wisdom dwelling within," continued the go-between, in the same strident tones, whereat Mrs. Blake bowed again, more frigidly than before; but Coralie burst into irrepressible laughter at the thought of that lean, dirty old man, the Rao, being called young and comely, whilst even Susette's pathetic little visage broadened into a smile.

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The Brahmin flung his hands aloft in token of outraged dignity, glaring at Coralie as if he would annihilate her with a look if he could; until the glimpse of hate in his baleful eyes checked her tendency to indecorous mirth, and sent cold shivers down her spine instead. Ratnawati had retired to the most distant corner, where she sat in discreet silence, with her face to the wall.

"Mir Aleffo hath wives of wondrous beauty, who minister to his needs, still doth he desire yet another, who shall be to him as the star of his existence, the bright and particular joy of his latter days," went on Mahandra, when the dislike of his glance had subdued to silence the irreverent mirth of Coralie.

Seeing the very low esteem in which wives were held in Rasputya, this poetical description of what Mir Aleffo's bride would be to him was decidedly far-fetched; but then the Brahmin was as diplomatic as he was shrewd, and it would never do to betray the true matrimonial status of a woman before these daughters of a strange nation, whom he had come to conciliate.

Coralie was perilously near to another outburst of merriment, despite the uncomfortable shivers which still pervaded her spine, for her acquaintance with the wives of the Rao had not led her to form any very exalted opinion of their beauty; the fat ones were very fat, whilst the lean ones were thin

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to emaciation; but good looks were even more scarce within the walls of the palace than among the work-worn toilers outside, whose lives held naught but laborious endeavour from infancy to old age.

Mrs. Blake seemed so totally unable to give these limits any personal application, that Mahandra found himself nonplussed, and forced to show his hand at an earlier stage of the proceedings than was strictly correct in Rasputyan decorum. But in dealing with ignorant people, he comforted himself that it was often necessary to depart from established law and order, and this fact served to absolve him from the charge of awkward bungling, which otherwise might haply have been preferred against him.

"Mir Aleffo hath determined to take for himself a wife of the daughters of the strange nation, who walk with their faces uncovered before the eyes of men, and who worship other gods," he announced, carefully watching the effect of his words upon his hearers.

Mrs. Blake gave a great start, whilst her face flushed an angry crimson. "What is that to us?" she demanded, sternly, regarding the wakileh with a gaze as steady as his own.

He salaamed until his body lay prostrate before her, while his brown forehead touched the floor at her feet. "High honour hath Mir Aleffo designed for thee, pale lady of the far-a-way land, in that

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he hath sent me to ask of thee the price of thy daughter, who draws music from the box!"

Mrs. Blake put her hand to her throat with a sudden movement, as if she were choking; then recovering herself, and rising to her feet, replied in a sharp tone, "Go back to Mir Aleffo, your master, and say to him that the maidens of the strange nation are daughters of *Kaiser-i-Hind;* they may not be bought or sold; and it is woe to that man who shall dare to work ill unto them."

Mahandra gazed up at her in amazed bewilderment. He could not understand this style of woman at all; then reflecting that perhaps she did not understand him either, essayed to make his meaning plainer.

"Mir Aleffo is a man of princely generosity; he will give payment in rupees, or in camels, knowing no stint in measure, or in number," he began, but the lady interrupted him hurriedly,—rudely he called it.

"No, no, my daughter is not for sale. Go back to your master, the Rao, and tell him what I say. Do you not understand?" she cried impatiently, as he still gazed up at her in stolid bewilderment from the floor. "You are to go; to go back at once and tell Mir Aleffo I refuse his offer, once and for all, once and for all!" and she repeated the words, with great slowness and distinctness, to give them emphasis.

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Still he gazed at her. Speechless now with mingled surprise and anger, some fear for his own personal safety being added thereto. For it was not a light matter to face the wrath of Mir Aleffo, and to give the lady's message, or even the intention of it, to his master, would be to invoke a tempest that might be fatal to himself.

It was Ratnawati who saved the situation. Springing up from her corner, and turning her face from the wall, she said eagerly, "Let the unworthy one, who is but a woman, speak, and save the lives, not of Brahma's priest alone, but also of these white captives, who come from the far-a-way land!"

"Say on, daughter, born but to be a solace and a help to that superior creation of Brahma—man," responded Mahandra, with dignity, the full effect of which was rather marred by his attitude at the moment.

"Go back to that man of valour, Mir Aleffo, who is both brave and wise, whose years have but imparted to him an added youth, whose strength increaseth with his age, and whose right hand waxeth stronger with length of days. Go back to this mighty one, and say that the white strangers from afar, but wait to confer with their own gods, concerning the great honour Mir Aleffo designeth towards them; when that has been done thou shalt be summoned again, wakileh for the mighty Rao, and the price of the maiden shall then be touched upon."

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Soothed by this timely intervention, Mahandra scrambled to his feet with more agility than grace, and took his departure with all speed; whilst Mrs. Blake, who would have added one more indignant denial to those already given, was stopped by Ratnawati, who laid her hand on the white lady's garment, imploring her in a whisper to desist, and let the priest depart in peace.

"Why should the mem throw away her life, and the lives of the maidens, when a little silence might save them all?" asked the black woman, when the last fold of Mahandra's draperies had disappeared from view.

"I could not sit silently down and leave such a proposal unrejected!" exclaimed Mrs. Blake, in an indignant tone, though the terrified look on her face bore witness to the fear that mingled with the anger.

"Don't be frightened, mother dear; there will be a way of escape found somewhere," whispered Coralie, in a valorous tone, though she was white to the lips herself.

But Mrs. Blake put her aside with a trembling hand. "Tell me," she said to the black woman, "did you know of this before?"

Thus driven into a corner, Ratnawati was forced to admit that she had known of the Rao's intention; that he had told her so much on the day when she had first come to nurse Mrs. Blake; binding

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her to secrecy by a threat that her head should be the forfeit if the matter leaked out.

It was because of this that Mrs. Blake had been treated with so much consideration; and not left to die of neglect, as otherwise she would have been.

"I wish that I had died, and these children with me, ere ever a fate so cruel had come to menace us!" the poor lady cried, in a tone of despair.

"What is a girl, that one should trouble so much about her? If it had been a son, now, over which the mem made moan, it would be different;" and the black woman snorted contemptuously.

"Cannot you help us, Ratnawati; you, who have been so kind? cried the poor mother, stretching out imploring hands to the faithful creature, who had proved such an unwearied nurse.

The woman grunted in an undecided manner; then she asked, in a tentative tone,—"What does the mem want?"

"To escape. To get clear away from this awful ridge, and the power of Mir Aleffo. Have you no boat, Ratnawati, in which we could get away?" cried Mrs. Blake, with panic in her tone.

The black woman shook her head. "The mem and the maidens would perish, she said, dubiously.

"Never mind, I would rather drown or starve than be turned into Mrs. Mir Aleffo; and forced to live with those dirty, quarrelsome ladies up

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yonder;" and Coralie nodded her head in the direction of the Rao's abode.

"Missi not want to be great lady, to wear gold bangles, and have rubies and diamonds so much?" asked Ratnawati, in an incredulous tone, spreading her hands out to express degrees of comparison, as she looked at Coralie.

"No, indeed! Don't you know that I am an English girl, and that I would cheerfully die rather than face such a life," and the poor child shuddered, turning ghastly white as she clung to her mother's hand for protection,—the weak, trembling hand that could avail so little against the strength and power of Mir Aleffo.

"Missi no have fear. Ratnawati save her, only she must have time—much time," replied the black woman, nodding her head with an air of decision.

At this, they fell upon her with tearful, incoherent thanksgivings, never doubting her ability to perform that which she had promised. And it was this same blind faith in her which became her best inspiration towards keeping her word.

No one had ever displayed such belief in her before, and the sensation was as delightful as it was novel. Little wonder, then, that she rose to the occasion, and determined to succeed, or to die in the attempt.

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CHAPTER X.

IN THE CLEFT OF THE RIDGE.

THE waters were slowly sinking again, and the weather was appreciably cooler, whilst the conditions of life on the ridge grew more endurable in consequence.

Meanwhile the Blakes watched the slow days go by with an admixture of dread and impatience, dread for what the future might bring, impatience because the suspense was so long drawn out.

In the case of Coralie this impatience was intensified by reason of that secret knowledge of hers anent her father's disappearance, and her sleep was disturbed by nightmares, hideous and horrible, through fear of what might be happening to him.

It was characteristic of Coralie that the fate overhanging herself did not at this time disturb her nearly so much as the danger her father was incurring, or the discomfort and anxiety overshadowing her mother and Susette.

Evening by evening, with the help of Ratnawati, she dragged the harmonium out on to the little verandah in front of the hut, and sang her stock

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of hymns to the entranced and eager natives, who, squatted on the ground at a respectful distance, laid greasy heads together to whisper comments on the white missi, talking with her spirit-of-the-box.

Ratnawati divided her time pretty equally now between her own particular nursling, Amrita, and her new *protégés*, the white captives. But Coralie, at her mother's urgent request, went no more to visit the ladies of Mir Aleffo's household, although Amrita sent the most imploring messages she could devise, begging her to come.

Then came a day when a discovery was made, which, whilst bringing a mournful satisfaction to Mrs. Blake and Susette, was to Coralie the beginning and consummation of despair.

It happened in this wise. With the daily receding of the waters, the mohanas were compelled to go further in search of their fish, and one day whilst hunting among the loose crags and big boulders of sandstone at the outermost point of the cleft in the ridge, they came suddenly upon a decomposed human body, tucked away between two rocks, and which neither jackals nor alligators seemed to have discovered.

The corpse was clothed in garments of European make, and the men quickly recognised them as those worn by the sahib-father. Leaving the remains where they had discovered them, they came

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in all haste to Mrs. Blake's hut to inform her of what they had found.

The lady herself bore the tidings with that same patient resignation which she had displayed before, whilst Susette shed more tears to her father's memory, and uttered a fervent thanksgiving that he had not been devoured by alligators. It was only Coralie who disbelieved, and who insisted on being permitted to view the corpse, for she was remembering her father's injunction not to believe him dead until, with her own eyes, she had seen and identified his body.

Her mother yielded to her desire at length, and consented to her going, only stipulating that Ratnawati should accompany her; for so fearful of Mir Aleffo had Mrs. Blake become that she could not bear to let her elder daughter out of her sight unless Ratnawati was present to protect her. This fear was not because of any attempt on the part of the Rao to press his suit in person, for, excepting two more visits from Mahandra, the whole business seemed to be in abeyance.

The two mohanas who had discovered the body took Coralie and her companion round the end of the ridge in a small boat, that being the quickest and easiest way of reaching the spot, which was encumbered with big rocks and beetling crags.

A tremor of nervous fear was upon Coralie before they reached the spot, and when they stepped out

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of the boat, and commenced to scramble over the rocks, such a black horror seized her that she could not, for some minutes, open her eyes to look upon that which she had come to see.

The first thing that caught her attention was the torn toe-cap of one shoe. She remembered how her father had tried to mend it, and had failed, saying, with a laugh, that he should be compelled to go barefoot like his neighbours unless there came a speedy ending to his captivity.

From the shoes she let her gaze travel to the face, but the birds of the air had left her little clue to recognition there, and she was forced to rest content with the identification of the clothes, which had, without the shadow of a doubt, been the property of her father.

A little burst of natural sorrow, and then she gathered up her courage for the future. The thing which her father had lost his life in attempting must be her work now, and she dedicated herself to it upon the spot; for was she not English too, even though she had never beheld the country to which she belonged?

"He must be buried in the earth, according to the customs of our country," she said, as soon as she could command her voice to speak.

To this the mohanas had many objections to raise, for they of Rasputya have a great dislike to rendering any service to the dead. But Coralie was

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resolute, and, seeing that in all probability she might soon have the power of influencing the Rao on their behalf, the men came to the sulky conclusion that it might be politic to give her the service she asked for in the disposing of her dead.

Accordingly they scooped out a shallow grave, as she directed, in the soft sand at the foot of the rocks, and then—though with manifest reluctance—laid the body therein, and filled the hole in with sand once more. After this Coralie and Ratnawati lent their aid in dragging huge fragments of rock and boulders of red sandstone to build a little cairn, with which to mark the spot where the remains rested.

"And now," said Coralie, when this too was accomplished, "will you please go and bring my mother and sister here, that we may have a burial service according to our own religious rites?"

But the mohanas replied that they had already lost more time than they could afford, in the service of the white strangers, and their wives and children would starve, unless they caught the fish for which they had come in search.

Upon this, Ratnawati interposed, declaring hotly that unless they did at once what the white missi commanded, both they and their families should be flung to the jackals that very night, and that the legions of bad spirits, which hovered near when darkness brooded over the earth, would seize on

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their spirits, and hold them in everlasting thrall, unless they hasted at once to bring the captive mem and the young maiden to the end of the ridge, with all possible speed.

Her scolding and threats had the desired effect, and the mohanas scrambled over the rocks to their boat again, with only a grumbled protest concerning the needs of those depending upon them for daily sustenance.

"It is to the house of that man of valour, Mir Aleffo, that I go this night, to bring away the portion of meal set aside for those held captive by the Rao's will. And at his hands will I require another bag of meal, which shall be the reward of service duly rendered," retorted the black woman with an encouraging flourish of her arms, which sent the erstwhile sullen mohanas off in a state of radiant satisfaction; for meal was a luxury not often enjoyed by the poorer dwellers on the ridge during the season of inundation.

The two who were left among the rocks sat down to await the coming of Mrs. Blake and Susette. Coralie wore a look of stern repression, that ill-suited the merry lines of her bright young face. But the countenance of her companion was inscrutable in its shining complacency; and no one seeing her would have dreamed of the daring scheme for the release of the white captives, that she was formulating in that shrewd brain of hers.

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Out over the wide, dreary flats of the salt-marshes, tracts of dry land were appearing here and there, whilst the silver thread of the deep Rasputya water-way wound in and out among these miniature Ararats, until it finally disappeared in wilderness.

Mrs. Blake's face was wan and pitiful when she reached her husband's grave, and the slight form of Susette was shaken like a reed in the wind by the uncontrollable violence of her grief.

"You knew him again, Coralie?" asked Mrs. Blake in a whisper, as she clung to her elder daughter for support, standing by the little cairn of rocks and ruddy sandstone.

"Only by his clothes, mother; there was the torn place on one shoe, you remember, and I recognised the other things too," she answered, with a gasping sob.

Mrs. Blake bowed her head, murmuring "'God's will be done,' on earth as in heaven, the dwelling-place of the Holy One. Coralie, will you read the burial service, or must I?" and the bereaved lady drew from her pocket the prayer-book she had brought with her for that purpose.

"I will, mother dear. He called me his curate, you know; and now, since there is no other, I must be so in reality," she said, with a smile that ended in a sob.

And so, for the first time since the world began, perhaps, the words of earth-to-earth committal re-

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To their great surprise, every man of them dropped their muskets and stood stolid and still.—*p.* 89.

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sounded on the Rasputya ridge. Coralie's voice did not falter; the thought of the task that rested upon her own shoulders by the death of her father, made her strong now in her self-control and determination to carry out the work that had fallen unfinished from his hands.

When the service was ended, and they had knelt for a short space in silent prayer beside the grave, the mother rose, and drawing her daughters towards her, kissed them tenderly, whispering, in a tone too low for the mohanas to overhear, "We shall not forget him, even though we never stand by his last resting-place again."

As the boat was too small to take them all back at once, Ratnawati and Coralie undertook to scramble over the rocks, whilst the others went by the easier way of the water.

A company of Mir Aleffo's warriors were at target practice on the ridge; and the two pedestrians narrowly missed being hit by stray bullets as they came up on to the high ground. Then, when they appeared in view of the shooters, to their great surprise, every man of them all dropped their muskets, and stood stolid and still, like stocks or stones, until they had not merely passed out of range, but were out of sight altogether.

"Now they will begin again, I suppose; but why did they stop, Ratnawati; and what made them hold their heads so strangely?" asked Coralie of her

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guide, as they descended the narrow sloping track leading past the smashana, and which was their nearest way back to the hut.

The black woman wrinkled her face in some perplexity; then, putting out her hand, she dragged her companion round the base of a jutting crag, where there could be no danger from stray or random bullets. "Missi stay there, so, and Ratnawati will go see what make him, the Rao's killing men, so mighty civil all at once," she said; and, flapping her fat body on to the ground, began squirming rapidly back up the path they had begun to descend.

In a short time she returned, her face one broad grin of merriment, and shaking all over with her inward amusement.

"Him, Mir Aleffo, up there; him tell killing man to stop, and turn his head away whiles missi pass by," she gurgled in the intensity of her enjoyment of this practical proof of the Rao's respectful admiration.

But the object of it only shivered and grew pale. "Ratnawati, say that you can save us!" she pleaded, looking at the black woman with an imploring gaze; thinking of her widowed mother, her young sister, her father's grave, and the responsibility resting upon her; putting all these things first, where a more selfish nature would have been wholly concerned with the personal danger involved.

"Missi have no fear; Ratnawati save her for sure; him, Mir Aleffo, never have missi for his

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number nine, unless the jackals have Ratnawati first," she replied eagerly, nodding her head, and seeming to linger with great delight on the pronunciation of her own peculiar and musical name.

"How will you save us?" persisted Coralie, whose faith to-day seemed to need something tangible to feed upon.

"Ratnawati know a many ways; she try them all, if one not do, she take another. Missi have no fear, no fear at all," she said, in a tone of impressive energy; and then would volunteer no further information—would not even reply to the questions put to her—so that Coralie was fain to be content with the bare assurance, that she would be saved from impending disaster.

That night the black woman disappeared, after previously warning the captives that she should be absent for a time. For three whole days and nights they waited and watched for her return in vain—being themselves, meanwhile, a prey to the liveliest fears and apprehensions of evil.

And the third evening, at sunset, Mahandra, clad in his wakileh finery, appeared before the hut once more.

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CHAPTER XI.

DEATH IN THE POT.

MOTHER and daughters looked at each other in despair, and the same thought was in all hearts, "If only Ratnawati were here!"

But there was no sign of her coming, and the face of the Brahmin priest wore already a look of gloomy triumph.

"Mother, mother," whispered Coralie, with a sudden inspiration towards diplomacy, "don't be so angry with him to-day, but talk to him in the same way that he talks to you, only don't promise him anything."

Mrs. Blake nodded slightly in token of compliance as Mahandra, with solemn step and slow, swept up over the little verandah, and into the hut, where he squatted, with a great assumption of state, right in the centre of the mud floor.

"The wise and ever-young Mir Aleffo sends greeting," announced Mahandra, in slow and solemn tones.

As this statement hardly seemed of a nature requiring an answer, Mrs. Blake gave it none,

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saving a bow that was as distant and non-committing as possible.

"Mir Aleffo is a great prince, he is Rao of Rasputya, and chief among the federated tribes of the frontier. A man mighty in wisdom and in knowledge is he, and, withal, a fighter of renown, having slain a host with his own right hand. And he hath had eight wives," continued the Brahmin, in the same sing-song tone he might have used in making religious incantations.

Mrs. Blake drew herself yet more stiffly erect, whilst her soft, gentle eyes emitted flashes of dangerous light, though her voice was cold and steady when she spoke. "That is very little; any man may kill another, indeed the animals do the same, but my ancestors have done much more wonderful things, they have mended men's legs when broken, and sewed new skin upon an old wound, so that the whole was healed; to men possessed of devils my ancestors brought peace and calm, thrusting out the bad spirits so that they might no longer abide therein; and many other wonderful things too numerous to be related now, lest the sun should set, and darkness descend ere the end of the tale had been reached."

Mahandra's jaw dropped, and his mouth came slightly open. He had not expected such volubility from the quiet little lady who was the widow of the sahib-father, and he was rather staggered by

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it. But, recovering somewhat after a moment of unwonted hesitation, he retaliated glibly enough,—

"The ancestors of the white captives have doubtless been wonderful people, mighty in mysteries that are hid from common men. Yet of what avail are ancestors? They are dead, they have no being; they had no power to stay the bringing away captive of thyself and thy family; why then boast of the skill that has long since been resolved into a heap of charred bones, and a handful of dust?"

Mrs. Blake spread out her hands with a deprecating gesture, "Men's spirits die not when their bodies return to the earth, hence it is surely better to have good ancestors than bad, since we shall stand face to face with them in the ages not yet born."

Mahandra grunted; there was something in the lady's reply that savoured of heterodoxy to his own faith, but as he was not sharp enough to discover what it was, he was forced to let it pass in a dull and dignified silence.

It was Mrs. Blake's opportunity, and she seized it thankfully, resolved to tire him out with talking if she could; to be as slow and as prolix as possible, in order to gain the time necessary for Ratnawati to manufacture plans for their escape. "Who are the ancestors of Mir Aleffo?" she continued, her voice taking a mocking tone now, her acquaintance with the language, and long experi-

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ence of native character, giving her a wonderful advantage in argumentative warfare, wherein that one was victor who could talk loudest, and longest, and most convincingly. "Had he a father or a mother? Or did the vultures in their flight drop him from the clouds as they passed?"

Mahandra looked sulky. It was the one failing Mir Aleffo possessed in the eyes of this faithful admirer, that he had no ancestors worthy of the name, being the son of one of a former Rao's fighting men, his father having been a foundling, brought up in a village on the far-away Thar border. Mrs. Blake had come unconsciously very near to the truth, when she spoke of his having been dropped from the clouds, and the Brahmin was in consequence half-inclined to attribute to her the powers of witchcraft, or second sight.

"Mir Aleffo is descended from the gods," he remarked at length, determined not to be outdone in argument, and by a woman too, which would be especially disgraceful. "Vishnoo is his father, a daughter of Pandatakh is his mother, and the powers of eternity are in his hands!"

"Is that all?" asked Mrs. Blake, in well-simulated surprise. "And who was Vishnoo's father, pray, or was it he whom the vultures dropped?"

That Mahandra was angry now in good earnest, was plainly to be seen, and a half-fear seized and shook Mrs. Blake, lest she had gone too far in

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provoking his resentful and cruel nature. One thing, however, had been gained, and that was time, no word as yet having been said of the Rao's desire to extend the number of his wives, and every hour might be of value now in extending their chance of escape.

"It is enough!" uttered the Brahmin in an awful tone, rising to his feet, and pointing a skinny finger of menace at the shrinking lady. "This night, the great and mighty one, Mir Aleffo, holdeth a feast for the bravest among his fighting men; to-morrow he offereth sacrifice to his gods, and on the day that next shall dawn after, he taketh to himself the maiden of the strange nation." Here the finger of menace veered round, until it pointed at poor shrinking Coralie, who, half-hidden behind her mother, listened to the tidings with a groan of anguish.

"Courage, darling, courage; God is in heaven, and we are His children!" cried the mother, when Mahandra, with his sinister eyes, and threatening gestures, had taken himself away.

"But heaven is so far away. And God seems not to hear when we pray!" exclaimed little Susette, her slight figure trembling like a reed in the wind, from fear of Mahandra, and his master, Mir Aleffo.

"Mother, here is some one else. Is it a woman?" whispered Coralie, as a nondescript bundle of clothes appeared in sight, having inside it some specimen

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of the human form divine, that minced along with a queer uncertain gait, as if unused to much in the way of pedestrian exercise.

Voluminous folds of dirty white calico enveloped the figure from the head downwards, saving where, bound tightly about the slender ancles of the wearer, there showed the bright blue of a satin trouser frill.

An apparition of this kind was all the more strange on the ridge, where the toil-worn women wore almost no clothes at all, saving a dirty-coloured rag wound tightly round the loins; and even the attire of Ratnawati left much to be desired in the matters of sufficiency and decency.

"It must be one of the Rao's wives," exclaimed Coralie, with a sigh of relief at sight of the unmistakably feminine mode of progression, the little mincing steps, the sideway roll, and the quick, half-fearful turn of the head, as the unknown came to a halt, just in front of the hut.

Mrs. Blake rose to receive her guest, with her wonted gentle courtesy of demeanour, when her elder daughter brushed quickly past her, with a glad little cry of recognition. "Why, it is Amrita; I am sure it is!"

And Amrita it was, without any mistake at all, as was plainly to be seen, when she had a little unwound herself from the enveloping folds of her calico outer garment.

"How is it you are here, and alone?" demanded

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Coralie in surprise, when she had introduced the visitor to her mother and sister. The Rao's daughter was peering delightedly around, entranced with the novelty of all she saw in the bare little hut of the captives.

"There is to be a feast to-night—a big, big feast to my father's bravest warriors—and the women, his wives, are busy in making ready for it. Therefore, seeing they heeded me not, I crept away, when no faces were turned towards me, that I might come and see with my own eyes the spirit that is hidden in the box; and I wanted, too, that I might get speech of Ratnawati," replied Amrita, who was on her knees now, admiring the old and shabby button shoes Mrs. Blake was wearing.

"But Ratnawati is not here," replied Coralie, in a troubled tone.

Amrita stared at her in amazement. "Then where should she be straying, that she comes not to protect me from the cruelty of those women, who are my father's wives?" demanded the Rao's daughter, in a tone of spirited protest, feeling that her vicarious suffering must all be in vain, if Coralie had not been in the enjoyment of the care she herself had lacked.

"I cannot tell," answered Coralie, shaking her head mournfully; whilst a terrible doubt of Ratnawati's loyalty for the moment assailed her.

"She may have gone to bring hither to the ridge

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the new wife for my father; who, they tell me, is a maiden of high degree, and wondrously gifted and clever; though her name is hidden from me as yet," Amrita answered in a tone of great composure.

Coralie started, and the hot colour for a moment surged into her face; whilst Susette cried out in amazement,—"Don't you really know her name?"

Amrita shook her head in emphatic denial, and looked anxiously at Coralie, whose expression was strangely curious and doubtful.

Mrs. Blake came forward and took the hand of Amrita. "It is said that the Rao, your father, is anxious to make a captive his wife—the daughter of a strange nation—who would die sooner than face such a fate. Think you, is it in your power to save her?"

Amrita looked dubious and puzzled, then asked in her quick, abrupt fashion,—"Tell me, lady, what is you fear?"

"I fear—for her," and, choking back a sob of over-mastering emotion, Mrs. Blake pointed to Coralie, whose mingled mortification and disgust were now easy of interpretation.

Amrita burst into a laugh of derision, not the silvery-toned merriment usually ascribed by story books to natives, but a cachinnation—harsh, strident, and unrestrained—that got upon the nerves of the captives to quite a serious degree. "And is it you, who can draw sweet melodies from a

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wooden box, that my father desires to marry? Surely there is no man so foolish as he to whom a grey beard has come; it is as cotton in the mouth of a corpse, and signifies nothing saving the decay of all good sense," and again the laugh rang out, causing Coralie to stuff her fingers in her ears, whilst hot tears of shame rolled down her cheeks.

"Can you save her?" pleaded poor Mrs. Blake, clutching Amrita's hands in a tight grasp, her eyes imploring in their gaze.

The Rao's daughter shrugged her shoulders, "Some people would think it a great honour to be one of the wives of Mir Aleffo, but you of the strange nation are not as others."

"No, we are not as others," repeated Mrs. Blake, eagerly catching up the words, "and with us such a marriage would be looked upon as a crime, a thing not to be thought of without repugnance. Have you no influence with your father, to induce him to go elsewhere for a bride?"

Amrita gazed at her questioner in the blankest astonishment. "I am only a daughter, a domestic calamity; I have no power to say this shall be done, or that shall be left undone," and her tone, as she spoke, was full of a sad significance.

Mrs. Blake wrung her hands in despair, and the sisters shrunk closer together, as if protection might be found in numbers.

The softer part of Amrita's nature seemed touched

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by this display of grief, and, edging closer to the sorrowing group, she asked in an awed tone,—

"Won't your God help you now the sahib-father is dead?"

No one answered her for a moment, and then Susette said,—

"Our God is very great and powerful, but He hasn't seemed to hear our prayers lately."

"Hush, hush, child; God always hears the prayers of His children, and answers them, too, when He sees fit," cried Mrs. Blake, sharply, pained beyond measure at this open expression of doubt.

"If that is so why then trouble any more; He will stay the marriage if He chooses, and if not—well, it is of no use rebelling against a God," and Amrita dismissed the subject with a sigh of supreme indifference.

Not so Coralie. Laying her hand upon her mother's arm she said, "Mother, don't grieve so, Amrita is quite right, God can save us if He wills, and if not, who are we that we should strive when He bids us submit?"

Mrs. Blake shook her head in a voiceless misery too great for tears, and Coralie ventured on no further consolation; and indeed her own heart was too full for much speech just then.

"I must go," said Amrita, "or those women, my father's wives, will find out my absence, and they will beat me, especially Sanita, the ugly one, who

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hates me because my mother was beautiful. I wish Ratnawati were here, and then she would seize the stick from Sanita's cruel hands, and break it in twain before her eyes."

If the others echoed that wish for Ratnawati's presence, they did not do it audibly, feeling that some reservations might be prudent in presence of Mir Aleffo's daughter, and the young lady commenced pulling her dingy calico wraps about her face again, so as to screen herself from the gaze of anyone whom she might chance to meet.

"May I come again if I can get away to-morrow?" she asked, wistfully, looking at Mrs. Blake.

An almost imperceptible hesitation delayed that lady's answer for a moment; she was feeling that the less she saw of the Rao's daughter the better just then, only instinctive courtesy and a large amount of pity for the poor girl, withheld her from making this apparent. "Yes, you may come again if you will, and in the meantime we will be praying to our God for deliverance," she said, in a grave tone, yet with a light on her face which showed plainly that hope was not yet dead.

It was nearly sunset, and Amrita scudded away at a great pace, being fearful lest she should be overtaken by the darkness, under cover of which some hobgoblin might seize her, and bear her off to an unknown region of despair.

When she had gone, Mrs. Blake and her daughters

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knelt down to pray. It was supper-time, but they lacked the appetite or the inclination to prepare a meal; and kneeling there, on the rough mud floor of the hut, besought of heaven the help earth could not give.

Higher up the hill, in the abode of the Rao, the feast was made ready, and Mir Aleffo, with fifty of his bravest fighting men—their appetites well sharpened by long abstinence from food—sat down to the good cheer provided for them.

Mahandra was present, as a matter of course, and a rude image of Brahma presided over the feasting, a portion from every dish being smeared upon the feet of the idol, which, in course of time, became pretty liberally encrusted with these offerings of the faithful. Yet, though Brahma was the deity worshipped, the bill of fare held many an item no pious Brahmin should have soiled his hand and defiled his mouth by partaking. There was flesh of divers kinds, some seethed in a pot, some broiled on the coals. Bottles of whisky, of the description known as Scotch, were to be seen, while jars of arrack were placed conveniently near to the feasters; and every preparation had been made with a view to a wild and complete orgie.

A table, six inches high, was placed in the centre of the banqueting-hall—a mud-walled shed, with a leaky roof, through the holes in which one might see the quiet stars shining down on the revellers

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below. This place was lighted by torches stuck at intervals round the walls, and which lent a smoky, fitful glare to the proceedings, and caused the shifting shadows, succeeding each other on the face of the idol, to appear as smiles struggling with frowns.

The first item on the bill of fare was a big dish or tray piled high with balls of rice, with which were mixed many other ingredients, the pounded flesh of birds, with a kind of shell-fish or sea-snail,—shells included,—the mixture containing, besides, a liberal allowance of pepper and spices. The feasters partook of this dish in the simple and unaffected style of opening their mouths and tossing in the balls, this manner of feeding saving much labour in the matter of cleansing forks and spoons, which would have been necessary to a higher civilization.

Following the rice balls, copious supplies of arrack were indulged in; and when the drinking cups had been drained, huge jars and tureens of the famous Rasputya soup were brought in, soup so thick that it might have more correctly been called pottage, and compounded of almost everything that was eatable in the vegetable kingdom.

This food, having been first offered to Brahma, was then placed with much ceremonious observance before Mir Aleffo, whose appetite having been stimulated by the amount of pepper and spice contained in the rice balls, fell upon the pottage with great zest and enjoyment, whilst the equally hungry war-

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riors looked on, but dared not partake, until the Rao had eaten his fill. But later on, there was not one among those fighting men who was not thankful for the rigid observance of etiquette, to which they had adhered upon that occasion.

Mir Aleffo had eaten until, to his sorrow, he could eat no more, and he was in the act of passing the bowl to the man nearest to him, when a sudden paroxysm seized him, causing him to drop it with a crash, whilst he shrieked aloud in his awful agony.

Consternation fell upon the revellers, and a great confusion arose, as they scrambled up from their places on the floor and clustered about their leader, who had fallen in a writhing, struggling heap, foaming at the mouth, and displaying every appearance of having been poisoned.

"He is dying; he is dead!" shouted the frightened warriors, as, after a fearful spasm, the head of the Rao fell back, his jaw dropped, and of his eyes the whites alone were visible.

"He is not dead," said Mahandra, slipping his hand under the garments of the sufferer to discover if the heart was still beating; "but he soon will be, for alas, and alas, there was death in the pot!"

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CHAPTER XII.

SUTTEE FOR MIR ALEFFO.

THAT night, in the starlight, Ratnawati came back to the hut.

Mrs. Blake and her daughters were asleep when she arrived; they had remained on their knees in prayer until a feeling of deep peace, as from answered prayer, stole into their hearts, and then, still closely clasped in each others arms, they had laid down to slumber.

It was Coralie who aroused first, and hearing the subdued knocking upon the frail door of the hut, cried out in affright that Mir Aleffo had sent to fetch her away.

At this, up sprang Mrs. Blake, fierce as any lioness whose cubs are threatened with danger, calling out sharply to know who it was that so untimely demanded admittance to their abode.

"Hush! hush! it is but Ratnawati; open, then, quickly, lest other ears should learn the time of her return," came the answer in a no less peremptory tone.

With trembling fingers Mrs. Blake hastened to

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obey her behest; and unfastening the cord with which the door was secured, threw it wide open for Ratnawati to enter.

Plastered with slimy mud, green, grey, and brown, her scanty garments dangling about her in fluttering pennons of rags, Amrita's nurse was a sorry sight to be looked upon. She seemed worn out too, sinking to the floor, and lying there panting with exhaustion, whilst they brought her food, and plied her with questions as to where she had been, and the nature of her errand.

But at first she was too much spent to satisfy their curiosity, and just lay still, rolling her eyes in a fashion truly appalling to Susette, who crept away as far as she could.

Then recovering a little, she gasped, "Him, Mahandra, been here again?"

"Alas, yes!" exclaimed Mrs. Blake, and forthwith poured into the black woman's ear the story of her attempt to delay the negotiations, and subsequent angering of the Brahmin, the very mention of whom caused Coralie to shiver anew with fear and apprehension.

"Fear not, white missi, there may yet be time," gasped Ratnawati, whose bosom still heaved in distressful palpitations.

"Time for us to be saved?" cried Susette, springing up from her corner in an excess of jubilation.

But before Ratnawati could gain sufficient breath

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for a reply, there arose on the quiet night a hideous noise of shouting, groans, execrations, lamentations, curses, and cries of distress.

"Oh, what can it be?" cried Coralie, whose fears seemed all to have come back again.

"It is but the revellers returning from the feast, perhaps," retorted Mrs. Blake, in a soothing tone, although her own face had gone white, and her heart was beating almost to suffocation. So easily are fears aroused when the cause for them is not far to seek.

"Ah no, there is sorrow in the crying, and I hear the note of woe," exclaimed Ratnawati, scrambling to her feet with an effort; and, after standing for a moment in the centre of the hut, in an attitude of strained listening, she darted out of the door, and disappeared in the darkness.

A minute passed—perhaps two—and then, back she darted, nostrils twitching, eyes dilated, and wearing an expression of almost frenzied excitement and dismay.

"Him, Mir Aleffo, dead, poisoned with pottage—so fighting man say,—and Ratnawati must go to Amrita, or perhaps they poison her too," she cried; staying only to shout the information, then darting away in the direction of the Rao's house, where her active imagination already fancied her nursling being foully done to death.

Those left behind could only clasp each other's

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hands in voiceless congratulations; and then they sank upon their knees again to offer thanksgivings for the answered prayer. Mir Aleffo living, had been a tyrant to be feared; whose word meant death to some, despair to others, and was feared by all. But Mir Aleffo dead, was but an unpleasant memory, like a bad dream that is past; and, seeing such deliverance had come to them, they could gain faith from the fact, to believe that freedom would follow.

Alas for their hopes; they were reckoning without Mahandra; and, though they knew it not, that worthy was just then engaged in actively plotting their doom,—they being at present the best hated people of all his acquaintances.

The confusion and uproar in the Rao's house grew, rather than diminished, as the hours went on, until, by the time the dawning came, every inhabitant of the ridge—the captives excepted—were gathered, either inside or outside his late abode; whilst outsiders had begun to arrive in boats up the deep water-way, or by means of camels and asses along the streaks where was now dry land.

Ratnawati had secured the person of Amrita, and, getting her into a room apart, with food and water, constituted herself sole jailor and protector; and was prepared to stand a siege, or fight to the death, if need arose.

The wives of the dead Rao were gathered by

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themselves in another room. They knew their fate, poor things, and sat meekly down to await it; never for a moment resisting when, by order of Mahandra, their ear-rings and nose-rings were taken from them; the bangles and anklets were struck from their quivering limbs; and they, as shamed women, waited until death should be ready for them.

Only one manifested even a passing restlessness, and that was Sanita, the ugly one, whose hand had been the heaviest upon Amrita. At first she had sat sullen and stupid as the others; but as the hours passed on a fierce desire to escape took possession of her, and she raged and fought like a mad creature, crying out that she had seen too much of the tyrannical Mir Aleffo here on earth, to desire to abide at his side in heaven.

The words, natural enough in her fear of the suttee, were caught up as evidence against her; and it was said on all sides that it was the hand of Sanita that had poisoned the pottage, and brought death to her husband, the Rao.

Popular opinion, fostered secretly by Mahandra, declared that the murderess should die the same death as her victim; and Sanita—deprived of her jewellery, stripped, too, of almost all her clothes—was brought forth from the apartment where the other women were confined, and led into the midst of the yelling, shrieking crowd. Which, maddened with the lust of slaughter, would have fallen upon

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her—tearing her limb from limb—but for the restraining presence of Mahandra, whose more refined cruelty had planned a lingering death agony for the helpless creature, whom fate and circumstance had delivered into his hands.

Seating her upon a boulder of red sandstone, whilst a circle of fighting men, armed with spears, kept back the surging crowd of people, Mahandra commanded that the bowl of poisoned pottage should be brought; and when it came, forced a portion of the contents into the mouth of the shrieking, struggling woman.

A dead silence fell upon the watching crowd; and Sanita, awed by the sudden quiet, stayed her own frenzied screaming, and used her utmost endeavours at ejecting the stuff with which Mahandra and his assistants had filled her mouth.

Some portion, however, had been swallowed, and this, although not sufficient to cause a speedy death, as in the case of Mir Aleffo, was yet enough to produce violent and convulsive pain.

The sight of her writhing and struggling under the influence of the poison, proved infinitely diverting to the assembled crowd; they laughed and shrieked, hissed, yelled, and hooted, flung themselves upon the ground in paroxysms of merriment; and generally comforted themselves in the fashion of people gone mad with cruelty and hate.

When the fiercest violence of the suffering had

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a little abated, Mahandra forced some more of the pottage into the victim's mouth, whereat the shouts of delight burst forth afresh, because the sport of seeing a fellow-creature die was thus prolonged.

Meanwhile, avoiding the crowd, though all unconscious of the reason for its gathering, Coralie Blake came up from the hut lower down the ridge to pay a visit of condolence to Amrita.

The death of Mir Aleffo had worked her own deliverance, but she was not forgetting that it brought sorrow to her friend, the Rao's daughter, and thus was hastening to deliver in person those messages of sympathy and kindness which must of necessity have lost much of their value had they been transmitted through the medium of an indifferent person.

Mrs. Blake had not hesitated to let her go, thinking that no harm could possibly befall her now that Mir Aleffo was no more. And neither she nor Coralie gave a thought to Mahandra, not deeming him of sufficient importance to be feared at this juncture.

Within the house—as without—all was confusion and uproar, and Coralie managed to slip in, and make her way to the court of the women, without attracting the attention of the door-keepers, who were employing this period of disorganised leisure by sampling the whisky and arrack left over from the interrupted feast.

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Hurrying along the passages, her ear was caught by the sound of moaning, low and distressful, yet proceeding from several people; and, hunting cautiously about, she stumbled presently into the apartment where, stripped and bound, the wives of Mir Aleffo waited until the funeral pyre of their late lord should be ready.

"Why don't you try to escape?" cried Coralie, when an explanation of their condition and impending fate had been given her.

"For why should we try to run away?" asked one poor creature, who, although scarcely past her first youth, was long past any pretensions to beauty or comeliness. "There are thirty-five millions of hairs on the human body; the woman who ascends the funeral pyre, and becomes sati (holy woman) for her husband, shall spend so many years with him in heaven."

"Hari bol! hari bol!" murmured the others in a faint-hearted chorus, the ejaculation equalling in their language the "hurrah" in our own. But there was no jubilation in the sound; only a hollow despair, which struck to the heart of the listener, filling her with ineffectual longings to give them a better hope, and a brighter prospect in the path they had to tread.

When she tried to speak to them, however, to do true missionary work in the crass ignorance and blighting prejudices of their darkened understand-

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ings, they would not listen to her, bidding her depart, and leave them in peace. To be suttee for Mir Aleffo was their only hope of freedom from suffering on earth, by admitting them to ages of bliss in heaven; hence it was surely worth the passing pang of being burned to death, since it ensured so great reward.

Fearing lest some one might find her there, and tell Mahandra of her presence, Coralie hastened away from the wives of the late Rao, in search of Amrita and Ratnawati, even beginning to regret that she had ventured into the place alone, so greatly did the thought of the coming suttee oppress and sadden her.

The room where Amrita was confined was not hard to seek, but when she reached it, Coralie started back in terror and affright, for Ratnawati stood before the door, brandishing a long dagger, that already dripped with blood.

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CHAPTER XIII.

THE SPELLS OF THE STRANGE NATION.

On seeing Coralie approach, Ratnawati dropped the gory dagger out of sight, and smiled in friendly fashion upon the visitor.

"Missi come to see Amrita?" she asked in a cheerful tone—the weapon meanwhile being held behind her back, out of sight for the present, but close to hand in case of need.

"Yes; is she in there?" Coralie said, nodding her head towards the door.

"Missi come in, Ratnawati say she may. Fighting man come; Ratnawati say to him, go away before I make holes in that black hide of yours, which do cover up the cruel heart inside of you;" and she laughed gleefully, drawing forth the dagger, and flourishing it in triumph above her head.

Coralie slipped quietly past her into the room beyond, where Amrita crouched on a cushion placed upon the floor, looking frightened out of her wits.

She was very smart, though; Ratnawati having dressed her in all her jewels, and as many of those belonging to the despoiled wives as she could manage

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to steal, with any odd garments of silk or satin she could lay her hands on.

Amrita gave to her visitor a greeting of the sulkiest; and Coralie was so much taken aback by it as to be really sorry for venturing to penetrate into the house of mourning that day.

"I wanted to tell you that I was sorry for your trouble," she faltered, sitting down upon the cushion, and taking one of Amrita's very dirty hands in her own.

"Why should you be sorry? I don't want you to; and I'm not sorry myself, except that I'm afraid lest some of the fighting men should come here and kill me. One did try to get in a while ago, but Ratnawati drove him away with her dagger, so that he could not get past to do me harm;" and Amrita gave a frightened whimper, and instinctively got a little closer to Coralie, as if protection might be found there.

The other girl patted her soothingly. "Don't be so frightened; why should anyone wish to harm you because your father is dead? I should have thought it would have made them all the kinder."

Amrita laughed harshly. "That shows you know nothing of how we do things in Rasputya. If one of my father's fighting men can get the chance of killing me before the funeral fire is lighted, that man will be Rao. But if I am still alive after the body is consumed, then it is I who will reign

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over Rasputya in my father's stead; and oh, how lovely that will be! I shall go out in a boat every day, whilst the waters are over the marshes; and I shall have a white ass to ride upon. I shall be the happiest person on earth, if they will only let me stay alive until after the body of my father has been burned;" and then, overcome by her fears, Amrita began her whimpering cry again, so that Coralie was fain to bring her powers of consolation into requisition once more.

"They won't hurt you; Ratnawati won't let them. See how strong and brave she is!"

"But I am fearful, so fearful; and besides, a man might throw a spear in at the window whilst Ratnawati guards the door. Will you stay with me until sunset, and help to keep me safe? I will pay you well when I come to my own. You shall live here with me always, if you will; or I will send you and your mother and sister in peace and honour to your own country."

It would have taken a harder heart than Coralie possessed to resist this appeal; and though she feared her mother might be anxious at her prolonged absence, there seemed nothing for it but to stay. Arming herself therefore with a club of wood, studded at the end with sharp iron spikes, she placed herself at the opening in the wall, called by courtesy a window, and prepared to do valiant battle on Amrita's behalf.

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Whilst standing there, she began to talk to the frightened prisoner, who crouched in so much nervous trepidation on the cushion in the middle of the floor. She was telling her how they had prayed for deliverance on the previous night, and how marvellously their prayers had been answered.

"But your God didn't kill my father; it was Sanita who poisoned him," objected Amrita.

"If Sanita had not done the deed, some other way of deliverance for us would have been found," asserted the other stoutly, intent on showing Amrita how great was the power of the Christian's God.

"Do you mean that your God would have killed him?" demanded Amrita.

"I don't know about that. Our God could have saved me from the hands of Mir Aleffo, and yet not have taken away his life," replied Coralie, and then turned quickly to peer from the window, a movement in that direction having caught her ear. Some person was running away; but whom she could not discover, because of a thicket of euphorbia bushes which here grew close to the wall, hiding the runner from her gaze.

"Oh, oh, oh! It was some one who wanted to kill me," cried Amrita, in a veritable panic of fear, as she rolled over on her cushion in an agony of terror.

"I don't think it was; indeed, I am sure it could

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not have been, he ran away so quickly," Coralie answered with convincing earnestness, which even satisfied Ratnawati, who at that moment poked her head in at the door to discover the cause of Amrita's crying.

Out in the open air, where the people had assembled to see Sanita die, murmurs were arising that a new sensation must speedily be provided, or the crowd would make it for themselves. This was the opportunity for which Mahandra, the wily one, had waited and watched, and he hastened to take advantage of it, for the purpose of furthering some specially nefarious plans of his own.

Sanita was now so nearly dead as to have lost all power to writhe, and twist, and groan; and, kicking her unconscious form aside, with as little ceremony as if it had been a log of wood that obstructed his way, Mahandra stepped into the middle of the circle, and prepared to give the shrieking, yelling crowd the diversion for which they were calling.

"Did ye deem yonder worm accursed, that she stole the life of that man of valour, Mir Aleffo?" he shrieked, whirling his arms about his head in well-simulated rage. "I tell ye, men of Rasputya, that Sanita was but the tool in the hand of a master-craftsman, and therefore no more responsible than the hammer that drives a nail into a board. Her hand might do the deed, but it was the strength

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of another that moved her arm. Men of the Rasputya, children of Brahma, the omnipotent, and servants of Indur, the all-powerful, I call upon ye, purge out from your midst the witchcraft that shall yet work the ruin of all who dwell on the ridge!"

"Hari bol! hari bol! Show us but the way, good father, and trust us that we walk therein," the people answered, dancing now in savage glee because there was a prospect of more killing to the fore.

Mahandra had flung himself upon the ground, where he rolled, foaming at the mouth, and getting his flowing white robes sadly dirty in consequence.

The people ceased their noise and their dancing, standing still, and in breathless silence now, to learn the result of Mahandra's mental conflict, for it was supposed to be trouble of mind which induced his funny antics and strange contortions.

He grew calmer at length, and finally began to speak in laboured gasps, whilst the crowd pressed closer to catch the words that dropped from his lips.

"I see a mean hut," he panted, lying on his back, and staring up at the sky above him, "a small, mean hut, made of plaited bamboo, plastered with mud, the earthen floor of which is worn in great hollows, where the water lies in the time of the monsoon."

As this description would have been true of any

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abode on the ridge, saving the late Mir Aleffo's house only, popular curiosity rose to a pitch of intense excitement, though not by word or sign did the crowd venture to disturb the Brahmin at the present crisis.

"I see something within the hut that is not of our land," he went on, frowning fiercely up at the blue canopy over his head. "It is long and square, and has inside it a voice that speaks in tones that are sweet to the ear, yet which bring destruction on all who listen."

A fierce groan of execration swept over the multitude, but Mahandra was shrewd enough to discover that it was meant for him, and not for those he would fain have denounced. So he writhed and grimaced in fresh contortions of inward unrest, using the time thus gained to think out a fresh method of attack.

At length, when he had decided on his next move, and the groans of the onlookers had died to silence once more, he began to speak again, and this time his voice was so faint and far away as to be almost inaudible to his hearers.

"The spells of a strange nation are at work in your midst," he croaked, with such a hideous contortion of his visage that one might have thought him to be suffering from the poison which killed Mir Aleffo. "I see three strangers crouch low on the ground, and whispering incantations to the

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spirits of evil, which, flitting abroad on the face of the earth, do undermine men's belief in the gods. I hear, too, the words of the incantations. They are asking the spirits to turn Sanita's hand against that man of valour, Mir Aleffo, and lo, they have prevailed! The spirit has entered into Sanita, and she has poisoned the pottage. The people who knelt to whisper the incantations are triumphing now, they sing with rapture and delight, and say that since they have slain the leader it will be easy to destroy his fighting men."

A deep silence followed this delivery of Mahandra's, and the crowd for a moment appeared too much taken aback to express either approval or disapproval. Then a low murmur of talk arose; earnest discussion it was, waxing louder and stronger each moment.

The Brahmin gathered himself up from the ground, and stood erect; he was dishevelled and dirty from his grovelling, but the light of triumph was in his eyes, and he bore himself as one having authority.

"There are strangers in our midst, captives from Shankoash; yet are they not natives of that place, but wanderers from a country that is very far off, and where witchcraft and sorcery turn men's hearts to water in their breasts, so that they faint at the sight of blood."

"The white captives are harmless; women and

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children work but little evil, and the sahib-father is dead," objected a lithe brown warrior, to whose sick children the Blakes had been kind.

Mahandra smiled on the man in pitying toleration. "Ah, the spells have been cast over you; see how you wince and tremble at the thought of a judgment that may fall on those unworthy ones," he exclaimed, pointing a finger of contempt at the poor fellow until, abashed and ashamed, he shrank back out of sight behind the crowding warriors.

Then the Brahmin changed his tone to one of suggestive insinuation. "The pyre is ready laid, with which we do honour to our dead leader, and his wives wait eagerly the summons to suttee. Yet are their numbers few and small, and in consequence Mir Aleffo will make but a mean entry into heaven. Had he lived but two days longer, the elder of the girl captives would have been his bride; and in the eyes of Indur she is that already. Give her, then, brave warriors, a place among those others, who, for the sake of the valorous dead, will mount the funeral pyre; so shall she purge the evil of her present, and dwell sati with her husband in heaven."

Wild yells of dissent, mingled with shouts of approval, the crowd swayed, and broke, and bent. But amidst all the riot and confusion, Mahandra stood calm and at rest. He had won, and the hour of his triumph was at hand!

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CHAPTER XIV.

THE TUNE "ST. ANN."

LIFE in an outlying camp is, of all existences perhaps, the most insufferably monotonous; and if that camp chances to be pitched in the desert, so much the worse is it for the luckless men told off for duty there.

Lieutenant Cuthbert Lisle had photographed every bit of scrub or milk bush within a five-mile radius of the hillock on which the camp was posted. He had played at hockey, and at polo, until the name of either was sufficient to give him nausea; and he had argued upon every subject under the sun with his superior officer; and even this diversion had reached the point of satiety.

The garrison was not a large one. Major Sutcliffe, a corporal, and two privates, with a dozen Sikhs, as lean and wiry as the desert asses they bestrode, these constituted the sum total of young Lisle's daily associates; and it is not wonderful that he chafed under the tedium of the monotonous days, and long and colourless evenings, when there was nothing in the world to be done, saving

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to sing songs, with the jackals for an audience, or to remain silent whilst the jackals sung instead, letting the weird and mournful "Wha, wha, wha, wha-a-a-a" of the jackal chorus go on, and on, and on, until one could almost feel one's flesh creep, and one's hair rise on end with the ghostly horror of it all.

If there had been any danger to be feared, it would have been different, for danger lends a spice to monotony, and beguiles tedium with expectancy.

But Mal Mistri, as the hillock was named on which the fort had been built, did not offer much variety in that way; and the camp had been placed there, not so much for actual defence, as a precautionary measure, and a substantial exponent of British power, which might serve to keep the federated tribes of the frontier in a properly respectful condition.

One satisfaction Lieutenant Lisle had, and that was in the abatement of the waters, which left long tracts of land visible above the retiring floods, and made riding more possible than it had been for months. November was well on its way, and by the time December arrived there was every prospect of the marshes being dry ground once more, in which case some diversion in the way of hunting might be looked for.

It was the close of a fiercely hot day—for November can be very warm indeed, sometimes, on the

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wide-reaching Rann—and Major Sutcliffe was smoking a post-prandial cigar with his young subordinate, both men being stretched out at full length on deck chairs, placed upon the flat roof of their fortified dwelling. They were discussing, for about the five-hundredth time, that problem of how the disaffected natives succeeded in providing themselves with arms and ammunition in such liberal quantities, when the thud of approaching hoofs struck upon their ear.

"A camel; I wonder who it is?" cried the Major, springing up from his reclining posture, and standwith his head bent forward, listening intently.

"A visitor, perhaps, though it's a queer time to arrive; and besides, a visitor would hardly come alone; and there's only one beast that I can hear," remarked young Lisle, who was also straining his ears in the direction from which the heavy thud, thud, could be heard.

"There is only one, and it is approaching, not from Kurrachee, but the opposite direction. I wonder if anything is wrong. Run down, Lisle, see that Bell and the other fellows are awake; and tell them to hold themselves in readiness for anything that may turn up."

Away went Lisle, taking the worn mud-steps two at a time—his whole being tingling with delightful exhilaration. Of course, it might be only some harmless itinerant trader, who sought shelter

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for the night for himself and his camel; but then, on the other hand, it might be something entirely different, and the approach of the animal and its rider be but the prelude to the clash of arms, the snapping of rifles, and all the other thrills and excitements incidental to border warfare.

A blundering, unwieldy creature was that camel; and when at length it reached the gate of Mal Mistri, it seemed utterly spent with weariness and fatigue, whilst its rider was in no better case.

With true British hospitality the whole garrison turned out to help to succour the exhausted pair, although the man was merely a lean miserable native of mongrel antecedents, and the beast was a match for its master.

The man revived somewhat when he had been supplied with food and drink; and sitting up, commenced to explain his errand in the best Sindhi of which he was capable, though it might easily have been better. But as neither Major Sutcliffe nor Lieutenant Lisle understood very much of the language, they were forced to summon to their aid Corporal Bell, who posed as an expert in that direction.

But even the worthy corporal found himself at a loss to begin with, and the unknown had to repeat his story over and over again before the other could get what he was pleased to style "the hang of it all."

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The result was sufficiently startling—even to the lethargic and unemotional Bell. "An English lady and children to be rescued from the ridge of Rasputya!" he cried, seizing hold of the man, and shaking him, as if with a view to getting the information out quicker.

The native wriggled spasmodically, as though labouring under the delusion that the corporal intended despatching him forthwith.

"Where is the ridge of Rasputya?" demanded Major Sutcliffe, with a manifest air of doubt. He put no especial faith in the statement of the stranger, holding largely the theory that all natives are liars, and that they live only for one thing—to dupe other people—hence his want of credence now.

"I've heard of Rasputya, sir!" cried Corporal Bell. "It is on the Rann, but further away to the north-east. There's a Rao of Rasputya, a sort of robber chief; you've heard of him, too, only by another name—Mir Aleffo, they call him."

"Mir Aleffo!" exclaimed Lieutenant Lisle, in a tone of shocked awe. "Why, that must have been the man whose soldiers raided Shankoash, and killed the missionary and his family."

"Of course," Major Sutcliffe caught himself up with a start of remembrance. Government was intending to send an expedition to enquire into that affair, so soon as the retreating waters made it possible to penetrate into the fastnesses of the great

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Rann. Nothing had been done as yet, however, because of the tidings brought by a sure hand, that John Blake and his family had shared the fate of Toto and Beni Lam, when the Rasputyans had come down on Shankoash.

"Then who can the English lady be?" went on young Lisle, the light of a sudden animation overspreading his face. "Could Mrs. Blake have survived, do you think, sir? Wouldn't Uncle Joe just be in a state of delight!"

Major Sutcliffe shook his head, in the regulation wet-blanket fashion. "Not possible, I fear; you know how circumstantial the evidence was. My own opinion of the affair is, that it is merely a ruse to decoy us from Mal Mistri, in order to secure our ammunition and stores. I've known that sort of thing to be done before."

"Then you don't mean to take any notice of it; nor to send anyone to rescue them?" asked Lieutenant Lisle, in horrified amazement.

"I haven't said that," returned the major, hastily. "Indeed, no man with any sort of manliness in him could ignore such a call for help, just because he might perchance have doubts about the authenticity of the plea. I am only debating whether to go myself or to send you."

"Oh, send me, by all means," cried the younger man, in an eager tone.

But Major Sutcliffe still debated on the wisest

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course to be pursued, musing aloud as he reviewed the difficulties of the position.

"If it is a true tale, then I ought to go myself, for there may be sharp fighting, and those raiding rebels must be taught a lesson. But if, on the other hand, it is a put-up business, in order to draw us from camp, my place is here, since they are sure to attack as soon as our backs are turned. I'll tell you what I'll do, Lisle; you shall take Bell and half the men, leaving camp in half-an-hour or so, and I'll wire to Kurrachee for reinforcements. It will take the men forty-eight hours to reach here, and I will be in readiness to come on after you so soon as they arrive."

"I will be ready in half-an-hour, sir," said Lieutenant Lisle, suppressing with difficulty his satisfaction at his superior's decision, for well he knew that too much jubilation on his part might even now rescind the ultimatum just delivered, and leave him mewed up to the monotony of life at Mal Mistri, whilst the major rode forth on the errand of rescue.

No such dire calamity happened, however, and in less than half-an-hour the little expedition set forth, led by the native who had brought the tidings, and who, although worn and exhausted still, was so much the better for feeding, as to be capable of leading the party when mounted upon a fresh camel, in place of the sorry beast he had previously bestrode.

The Sikhs were riding their well-trained desert

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asses, which must not be confounded with the under-sized and under-bred Neddies common to our land, but which are a vastly superior class of animal, and in their way equal to a horse in the matters of speed and endurance.

Corporal Bell had a horse, there were three camels laden with necessary baggage and ammunition, and these, with Lieutenant Lisle, formed the entire rescue party; no very formidable force, certainly, but making up in indomitable pluck and determination somewhat of their lack in point of numbers.

The night was moonless, but brilliantly starlight, and being cool enough to make movement pleasant, the small company made good progress at their start, with the result that the dim outlines of Mal Mistri, behind them, quickly faded into nothingness, and the horizon was empty, saving for the star-bespangled sky above, and the stretches of yielding sand under foot, which was only varied by the still more yielding morass, a plunge into which meant a halt until dry ground was discovered again.

Despite his elation at this break into the monotony of days and nights at Mal Mistri, that night-ride across the marshes somehow got upon the nerves of Lieutenant Lisle in a most unaccountable manner. It was weird and ghostly past expression; dim forms seemed to rise from the diminishing pools as they passed, scudding away into the dense gloom, like spirits of evil that shunned detection.

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There were weird sounds, too, harsh croakings, doleful howls, and plaintive cries, the mystery and melancholy of which sent cold chills down his spine, and imparted to his hair an uncomfortable disposition to stand erect on his head.

No such sensation appeared to distress Corporal Bell, however, who, riding by the side of the native who was the cause of their coming forth, endeavoured to extract from him some further information concerning the lady and children, who were in such urgent need of succour.

But the man knew very little. A woman had sent him, so he averred, a servant of the renowned Mir Aleffo; and she had bidden him say to the foreign sahibs, that the captives were on the ridge of Rasputya, and must be rescued at once, or it would be too late.

"Why too late? Did Mir Aleffo intend to slay them?" asked Bell, with a savagely suggestive clutch at his bridle rein, and an inaudible wish that he might, ere long, hold the throat of the tyrant in a similar grip.

But to this no satisfactory answer could be given, since the man knew nought but his errand, which he had fulfilled to the best of his ability. He did not even hail from the ridge, but dwelt amid a cluster of sand-hills, half-a-day's journey on this side of the Rasputya water-way.

At this admission, even Bell shook his head, and

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expressed in a low tone to the lieutenant his belief that by all he could learn, this was plainly a put-up business to lure them away from Mal Mistri; and that they would be decidedly lucky if they ever reached camp alive again, or found the garrison safe when they got there.

"But there is the telegraph; they can wire for help if they are hard-pressed," cried Lieutenant Lisle, thinking thankfully enough of that thin line of wire, which, stretching across the desert, bound Mal Mistri to Kurrachee.

"They'll cut it, that's the first thing the beggars do, now they are wise enough to know what the wires are for; time was when they looked upon 'em as a sort of ornamental fencing, or a new pattern of clothes' line, when the chances were they let 'em alone. And even supposing, sir, as the Major wired afore communication was stopped, forty-eight hours is a long time for three whites and six Sikhs to hold Mal Mistri, against perhaps as many hundreds of Mir Aleffo's fighting men."

What more Corporal Bell might have uttered in the way of depressing misgivings is not known; for, at that moment, there came a sound through the night of rapidly approaching hoofs—dozens, scores of them—and at the noise, the little party drew to a halt, and with cocked rifles, awaited developments.

On, on, on came the feet, seeming to gather speed

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as they came; and the asses of the Sikhs grew restive, tugging at the rein, and displaying many signs of uneasiness.

"Caught!" exclaimed Corporal Bell, flinging himself from his horse, and interposing its body between himself and the foe he expected to encounter. We're fairly caught this time, my lads; and it only remains for us to sell our lives as dearly as we can."

Lieutenant Lisle felt, even in that supreme moment of agitated uncertainty, decidedly piqued at this inversion of authority; for it was he, not Bell, who was in charge of the expedition; and it was plainly a grave breach of military decorum for the corporal to take the initiative in the matter of sheltering behind his horse.

However, he wisely followed suit; it was plainly no time for standing on etiquette; and besides, Bell was twice his age, and had been in as many encounters as he had years to his record, whilst most potent argument of all,—the foe was close upon them.

A dim, white body pounced on them out of the gloom,—for the night was darker now, and the stars hidden from sight. Lieutenant Lisle gasped, gripped at his rifle and fired, aiming nowhere, then he and his horse were thrust aside, whilst the white body, followed by others of brown and grey, swept onward, and were lost to view in the blackness.

"Asses, wild asses, as I'm a living man, and we, every soul among us, in a twittering panic, think-

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ing as our last hour had come!" exclaimed Corporal Bell, in a disgusted tone, whilst Lieutenant Lisle still panted for the breath which had been so nearly knocked out of him by the sudden onslaught.

Then the worthy corporal bethought him of the hole he had made in his manners, and commenced an apology for the same.

But the young officer was already mollified, and accepted in the greatest good nature the explanations of the other, anent his unwarrantable assumption of authority.

"It is all right, Bell; I was none too steady myself," laughed he, in a conscious fashion, devoutly hoping that neither the corporal nor the Sikhs had noticed how scared he had been, or how wildly he had fired into the air, when the drove of wild asses swept by.

"It is a certain sign of winter on the Rann, the coming of the asses," said Bell, with quite the air of an old inhabitant. "The creatures can't abide the least touch of cold, and so they hark back from the hills when the nights get sharp. That white one was the leader; wherever that went, the others would be sure to follow, even if 'twas to certain death, that being their nature."

Very soon after this startling, though harmless episode, a pale light grew and spread along the eastern horizon, and a little later night had ended, and a new day begun.

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A short halt was then called, to rest and feed the weary cattle, and their equally weary riders. Breakfast was followed by two hours of sleep, and then they pressed forward again, steering always north-east, and always across the same marshy, sandy desert, past dreary pools and stunted euphorbia bushes.

But the travelling was less weird than at night, and they pressed on merrily enough, the native who was their guide becoming quite palpably complacent, and at ease, as the miles were passed over.

By-and-bye the secret of his satisfaction at the speed of their journeying leaked out by littles, thanks to the adroit questioning of Corporal Bell, and then it transpired that the servant of Mir Aleffo, who had sent him on the errand, had offered him two prices as a reward of his service; one, quite a miserable pittance, which he was to be entitled to in any case, the other, a much more magnificent emolument, which was to be paid, if the foreign sahibs arrived in time for the rescue.

This information tended still further to the disquieting of Corporal Bell, who became by reason of it quite firmly rooted in his belief that they had become entangled in a very dangerous and unpleasant position, from which their chances of escape were about as remote as they well could be.

They rested through the hottest part of the day, starting forward again at sundown, the march con-

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tinuing without interruption until the dawn, when they saw away in the dim distance a long ridge of higher ground, standing clear up against the sky; it was to this place, their leader told them they were bound—the ridge of Rasputya, where that man of valour, Mir Aleffo, had his stronghold.

"But we can't attack that!" exclaimed Lieutenant Lisle, in great dismay. Eight men against a host of well-trained and desperate fighters, who, moreover, would be entrenched behind their own fortifications.

"The man hinted that the captives would probably have to be got away on the quiet; sort of abducted, don't you see, sir," retorted the corporal, with a wink of great meaning; "and so we are to keep out of sight as much as possible, making our way by skirting the sand-boulders, so as not to let the gentry yonder know that we are coming."

Lieutenant Lisle nodded, in token of comprehension, but the prospect was not pleasing to him. He would have preferred to rescue the captives at the point of the sword, to execute doughty deeds of great valour, and distinguish himself generally; but to creep in unawares and carry off the prisoners, as a dog might steal a bone, was not exactly the way to earn a brilliant reputation, except, perhaps, in the matter of finesse.

It was afternoon before they came under the shadow of the towering rocks at the southern end

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of the ridge, and within two hours of sundown. No one appeared to have noticed their approach, nor could they observe any signs of life or occupation on the side of the hill as they neared it. A dense jungle clothed every part that was not rock, and even in the clefts and fissures of these, shrubs and trailing plants found a precarious roothold, and flourished to the best of their ability.

But though hidden from view, it was evident that the ridge was not without inhabitants, indeed, to judge from the hum of many voices which reached them where they stood, it was pretty thickly populated.

"Why do you wait?" demanded the man who had been their guide. "If you do not hasten I may loose my reward, even though I brought you to the ridge in time."

"We will go fast enough when we can see where to go to," rejoined Corporal Bell, in a testy tone. He was little better pleased with this style of doing things than Lieutenant Lisle himself, and would greatly have enjoyed venting his dissatisfaction upon someone at that particular moment.

"Hush!" said Lieutenant Lisle, putting up his hand to enjoin silence, "what is that?"

A strange sound certainly for that desert region, and the little company of men gazed about them in an amazement so great that it was almost ludicrous to behold. It was a hymn tune, played upon

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a harmonium, somewhere up there in the jungle, high above their heads, recalling — to the two Englishmen at least — recollections of church-going in their own land.

"I know that," said the lieutenant, jumping from his horse, and fastening it to a tree; "it is the tune 'St. Ann;' I used to play it on my violin when I was a boy at school. Perhaps they're having a service of some sort up there, let us go and see," and he prepared to climb where a faint track, that might be a path, showed amid the under-brush.

The others followed him, leaving one man only in charge of the horses, asses, and camels, which had been fastened close up under the shadow of the trees, in order that they might be out of sight.

The invisible musician still played on, and now they could hear a female voice singing an accompaniment, but it was too strained and pain-wrung to be sweet or pleasing; the words also were not distinguishable, though Lieutenant Lisle began to hum in an undertone,—as he cut his way through the brushwood and creepers obstructing the path,—

"O, God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come."

"We're nearing the top, sir, now, and it may be as well to keep as quiet as we can," cautioned the corporal.

And the other wisely took the hint.

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CHAPTER XV.

THE DISCOMFITURE OF MAHANDRA.

THE singing stopped suddenly, the harmonium likewise, and a hum of many voices filled the silence for a minute, then came a hissing, crackling noise, as from a fire just lighted.

Again a pause of profound silence, broken by fearful, piercing shrieks, followed by an outburst of hoarse shouts and yells, savage and discordant.

No use to whisper caution now, Lieutenant Lisle had dashed forward at the top of his speed, crashing through the matted undergrowth, leaping over obstacles, and the sorely-troubled Bell had no choice but to follow him.

The path was better trodden now, and freer from obstacles; a minute or so of swift running brought him plump into a great concourse of people, who were gesticulating and shouting, whilst immediately in front dense masses of smoke and flame were wreathing round a funeral pyre.

"It's a suttee; they're burning women!" ejaculated the corporal, in a hoarse shout of mingled rage and disgust.

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Young Lisle did not hear him, however, but dashing the intervening bodies aside, sprang forward just in time to receive into his arms the form of a young girl, who at that moment leaped from the blazing pyre, her long hair and her garments just beginning to burn.

"Save me, save me!" she shrieked; and holding her firmly gripped in his left arm, the young man swung his sword round with his right, prepared to do valiant battle on her behalf, against all and sundry.

No one ventured any molestation, however; but drawing a little away, as if in fear or distrust, stolidly watched the greedy, all-devouring flames, as they leaped and danced about the pile of wood.

Ever and anon the soldiers caught glimpses of human bodies on the pyre. And once Corporal Bell shouted that one of these moved, and a woman cried out. But it was too late for rescue then, and the new arrivals could only stand by as the others, and watch the rapid destruction of the pyre.

The girl had kept her face covered, as if from fear at sight of the fire, but she lifted a grimed, smutty countenance at length, as if to see what manner of man her deliverer was.

It was his turn to be astonished then, so strangely familiar were the eyes that looked into his.

"Why, why, who are you?" he demanded, staring blankly at her, as she drew from his supporting arm, and stood erect before him.

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"I am Coralie Blake," she said, with a dignity that sat strangely upon her, when taken in conjunction with her dishevelled head and torn garments.

"But—" here the young man paused in momentary doubt as to the best way of framing his question, whilst Bell and the Sikhs pressed closer, in their desire to be informed likewise. "We, that is, Uncle Joe, thought you were all killed at Shankoash?"

"No," replied Coralie, miserably conscious now of the spectacle she presented in her rags and dirt. "We were not killed at Shankoash, but were brought as captives to the ridge."

"And you are all here?" the young man asked, in a tone of joyful exultation.

"Mother and Susette are here, but father is—is dead," she faltered, a choking sensation coming into her throat, as she thought of his brave, though ineffectual effort on behalf of his country.

Before the young man had time to say another word, or give utterance to the question trembling on his lips, there came a sudden interruption, as unexpected as it was unpleasant. A wild, frenzied yell burst out close beside them, and a Brahmin priest, clothed in all the finery permitted to his office, rushed towards them with a gleaming scimitar, flashing aloft in his strong right hand.

"Down with the sorceress!" he was crying; "down with the sorceress, who invoked the 'spirit of the

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box' to destroy Mir Aleffo. Slay the white witch, who stole the hearts of the warriors, and turned them to water in their breasts!"

Another instant and the flashing scimitar would have descended with fatal force on Coralie's uncovered head, but ere that instant passed, Corporal Bell brought the butt end of his rifle down with stunning violence on the side of Mahandra's head, felling him to the ground, where he lay like a log, bereft of sense or motion.

"Any more of you gents got a desire to speak, because if so, say on; we're all attention here at present," shouted Bell, to whom the first blow was as the taste of blood to a tiger, letting loose the strong ungovernable thirst for more of the same sort.

But the warriors, although they stood close together, with lowering brows and moody aspect, remained perfectly silent, as if indisposed to resent the blow which had laid their spiritual leader low.

"Let us go to mother; she will be so frightened for me if any one tells her that Mahandra tried to make me suttee for Mir Aleffo," said Coralie, urgently, for Bell's attitude was aggressive to quite an alarming degree, and she was most anxious not to provoke those stolid warriors, who had refused to kill her at the instigation of Mahandra.

She was seriously uneasy, too, concerning her mother and sister, not knowing what schemes the

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wily and cruel Brahmin might not have put into operation against them, though she was well aware that the chiefest of his hatred was vented upon herself.

"Will you lead us to them now?" asked young Lisle, courteously saluting, whereat she blushed furiously, wondering if the action was evoked through mockery at her appearance.

But there was nothing in Cuthbert Lisle's open, candid face to suggest contempt; and decidedly annoyed with herself for this silly display of self-consciousness, she carried her head higher than usual, as she led the way through the curious crowd, which drew aside to let them pass.

The lieutenant walked on her right hand, Corporal Bell following one step behind on the left, the five Sikhs bringing up the rear. The native who had guided them was nowhere to be seen, and had most probably hurried away to seek out his employer, and claim the promised reward.

"Do you know that I am a sort of cousin of yours?" asked young Lisle, smiling down with frank friendliness upon the girl at his side.

"Are you? I didn't know that I had any cousins," rejoined Coralie, in a dubious tone, and stealing a glance up into his face.

"I don't think you have any real ones, not on your father's side, at least," he replied; "but he had a brother, Richard, who died a long time ago."

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"I know," said Coralie, softly; "Richard was the heir."

"Yes, he married my mother when I was a very small shaver, indeed; and that is our bond of relationship, Cousin Coralie!"

"I see," she replied gravely enough, and then she led the way in silence down the hill, past the frowning walls of the late Rao's abode, behind which Ratnawati still kept jealous watch and ward over her nursling.

There was a sentinel posted at the door of Mrs. Blake's hut, a creature of Mahandra's, the sight of whom in such a position awoke in Coralie the liveliest apprehensions.

He slunk away at their approach, however, and with a beating heart she sprang up the steep step of the little verandah, and pushed open the door of the hut, but the soldiers remained outside.

Her mother was there, crouched on a low seat by the bed, and holding a long knife in her hand. Susette she could not see, unless, indeed, that bundle on the bed, swathed in rags, could be her little sister.

A wild fear of what her mother in sharp despair might have done, smote Coralie's heart, and turned her sick with dread.

"Mother, mother, why do you look so strange? I am here, I am quite safe," she cried, tearing the knife from the poor lady's nerveless hands, and flinging it into a far corner.

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But Mrs. Blake, with a gasping sob, fell senseless against the bed, and Coralie, not staying to make any efforts at her restoration yet, seized at the bundle of rugs, and tore them apart with frantic fingers.

Susette was there—and unharmed. One small hand pillowed under her thin cheek, the little girl lay, sleeping profoundly. And in the hugeness of her relief Coralie forgot the soldiers outside, who might be witnesses of her breakdown, and collapsed in a fit of uncontrollable weeping.

The listeners outside misinterpreted the sounds into indications of fresh disaster, and, staying for no ceremony, the two white men hastily entered the dark little hut.

"What's up now, Cousin Coralie?" demanded the lieutenant, stepping quickly to the side of the bed, and looking down on the sleeping Susette. "Is that your sister? What a pretty little thing she is."

Coralie recovered herself with a jerk, her fear had been so terrible and overmastering that she had given way before the strain of it, but she was not disposed to let these strangers see her weeping, nor yet to tell them the cause of her hysterical emotion.

"Mother has fainted. Poor mother! I am afraid they told her that Mahandra meant to kill me," she said, bestirring herself now towards the recovering of her mother, whilst Susette moved,

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roused, and finally awoke, sitting up on the bed to stare in amazement at the strange young Englishman who was bending over her mother, whilst Corporal Bell peeped anxiously in at the open door.

Then she espied her sister. "Why, Coralie, Coralie, have you come back?" she cried, in an ecstasy of jubilation, flinging her arms about the older girl, and hugging her vigorously.

"Susette, what did they tell mother about me?" asked Coralie, anxiously; she was dreadfully alarmed by Mrs Blake's continued unconsciousness, and the rigid horror of her face before she fainted.

"I don't know. Mother wouldn't tell me, but she said you were not coming back to-day, nor yet to-morrow perhaps, and then she bade me go to sleep because she wanted to think," answered Susette, whose blue eyes were still holding the strangers in a questioning scrutiny.

It was clear enough to Coralie now. The man whom Mahandra had sent to prevent them leaving the house, must have told Mrs. Blake of the fate in store for her eldest daughter; and she, in her fear of something similar for Susette, had resolved to kill the little girl with her own hands rather than see her fall into the power of the wily Brahmin.

Mrs. Blake recovered from her death-like swoon after a time, but she was not conscious, and knew neither Coralie or Susette. This was a complication Lieutenant Lisle had not bargained for, and he

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was considerably non-plussed by it. Although it would have been a comparatively easy thing to have got away with the captives if they had all been well, and able in a measure to help themselves, it was a vastly different matter to get off with an invalid, who might die on the road for aught he knew to the contrary.

In his perplexity he was fain to consult Coralie, who seemed to be a very capable young person indeed, and equal to the exigencies of any situation.

So he told her, as briefly as possible, of the message that had been brought to Mal Mistri, and how he had come with his little company to rescue the captives before it should be too late.

Coralie's face lighted up with a sudden understanding. "It must have been Ratnawati who sent for you. They were trying to force mother to give me in marriage to Mir Aleffo, the Rao of Rasputya, and Ratnawati promised that she would save me if she could. She was away three days, and when she returned Mir Aleffo was dead."

"And you thought the danger over then, I suppose?" asked the lieutenant.

"Yes; and I went to condole with Amrita, who is my friend, because of her father's sudden death. At her urgent request I stayed with her for a time, and whilst I was there Mahandra came to say that mother had come up to see the suttee of the Rao, and that she desired to speak to me for

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a moment. Directly, however, that I had left the part of the house where Amrita was being guarded, I discovered that this message was a subterfuge to get me away from Amrita, and any chance of a rescue at the hands of Ratnawati. My arms were bound, and I was carried out to the funeral pyre, which by this time was quite ready for lighting. Then Mahandra told the people that he was about to send me to make sweet music for Mir Aleffo in Paradise, and he had the little harmonium, which was brought from Shankoash, hoisted on to the pile, and I was lifted up beside it."

"He's a nice sort of wretch that Mahandra, and I should like to make his acquaintance at close quarters before leaving this part of the world," said Lieutenant Lisle, whilst his fingers sought the handle of his sword, in a gesture fraught with meaning.

"It was so dreadful," replied Coralie, "to be lifted up there close beside that dead man and his unconscious wives, for they had all been drugged to keep them from feeling pain. And then the people shouted that they must hear the 'spirit in the box' speak once again before the pyre was lighted; I had to sing too, although the words stuck in my throat, and my fingers trembled so much that I could hardly press the keys down. I thought my time to die had surely come, and I could only pray that God would not let the fire hurt me much. I have always had such a fear and

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horror of fire, that to be burnt to death seemed the hardest possible way of dying," and her voice broke suddenly at recollection of the past terror.

"Never mind; it is over now, and you made a plucky jump for it," said the lieutenant, in tones of strong admiration, "most girls would have fainted like logs long before that."

"When I saw Mahandra come to light the pyre with a big torch, I felt I could bear it no longer, and I was practically unbound, because they had been obliged to loose my hands in order to let me play the harmonium," Coralie went on, with another retrospective shiver, "and then when the flames shot up all around me I just jumped anywhere."

"Your anywhere happened to be in the right place, and at the right moment. I caught you as you fell, but it was Bell who saved your life when that chappie with his hook-sword came for you," retorted the lieutenant.

"I think there was no question of happen in it," she answered, in a low tone, and a heightened colour. "God meant to save me, and He took His own way of doing it; that is all."

The young officer was silent, but there was a very grave look on his face, for he was wondering what might have occurred, if he and his men had not arrived at that particular minute. Supposing they had been delayed in their march, or had failed in striking on the identical spot for mount-

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ing the ridge, or that some of a thousand other delays had happend to them—what then?

But no such doubts shook Coralie's faith in the interpositions of a wonder-working Providence. Marvellous had been their escapes in the past; this was but another link in the chain, whilst the future might hold even greater risk and commensurate salvation.

There was a look on her face that made Lieutenant Lisle feel as if that bare, sordid little hut was somehow holy ground; and putting up his hand he unfastened his helmet, and took it off, just as if he had been in church.

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CHAPTER XVI

THE RANEE'S PLEASURE.

RATNAWATI'S vigilance had met its reward, and the body of Mir Aleffo had been reduced to ashes before any of his warriors had found a suitable chance of assassinating Amrita.

And that young lady was Ranee of Rasputya, in place of the late Rao, her father. A position and a privilege which was her intention to live up to, and she lost no time in commencing on the process.

The warriors were still standing round the smoking embers of the funeral pyre, listening in stolid solemnity to the frenzied eloquence of Mahandra, who was urging them to slay the white captives, and make a speedy despatch of the rash strangers who had come to their rescue, when a black figure came into sight, on the rising ground before the house of the late Rao, and commenced to blow a trumpet summons, on a battered old instrument that had once seen service in the British lines.

The trumpeter, whose clothing was of the scantiest, had painted his body in alternate stripes of red and yellow, the former a token of mourning for Mir

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Aleffo, the latter in honour of Amrita's accession to power, and he put the full force of his sturdy lungs into the blasts he blew upon his trumpet.

The warriors paid little heed to the haranguing of the Brahmin now, but hastened across the open ground to discover the errand of the trumpeter, who was herald-in-chief in the house of the ruler of Rasputya.

There was some soreness and chagrin in the hearts of these fighting men, because a woman was to reign over them; yet, there was not one among them all who would not prefer to give allegiance to Amrita, rather than to have been forced to yield it to a brother-in-arms. And this feeling caused them to evince a greater loyalty for the Ranee, and a warmer zeal in her service, than otherwise might have been the case.

The trumpeter was calling them to an audience with the Ranee in the banquetting hall, where Mir Aleffo had supped the deadly pottage. And when he turned, they stalked after him in sombre silence; their bare feet making no sound at all in the thick dust of the pathway.

The shed—the meanness of which has been previously commented on—was still littered with fragments of the interrupted feast. Pieces of rotting melons, filthy strips of mango skin, bits of tamarinds, and other similar garbage, lay unheeded on the floor; although the half-starved dogs pertaining

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to the household had made a clean sweep of all scraps of flesh, cakes, and other similar food stuffs. In the midst of this squalor and neglect, Amrita's finery and jewels made quite a dazzling display, whilst the flimsy bit of stuff decorum obliged her to wear as a covering for her face, no more hid her charms from the eyes of her subjects than the mists of the morning shut out the refulgent warmth of the sun.

Ratnawati had been well aware of the necessity for keeping her nursling in a condition of readiness for this first state ceremonial, and when the right moment arrived, was fully prepared to take advantage of it, and stood in triumph behind the heap of cushions on which Amrita reclined, when the warriors began to file into the hall.

There was no noise of footsteps, or murmur of voices, as these fighting men of Rasputya gathered into their places; although here and there might be heard a low-breathed "Ugh," expressive of extreme satisfaction, as these stolid robbers of the desert gazed on the beauty and glittering splendour of the Ranee, and decided, each in his own slow way, that anyone so magnificent was surely worth the risk to life and limb that her service might entail.

Ratnawati called upon them in a loud voice to take the oath of fealty, and they responded without a single dissentient voice, though each individual

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man of them all regarded women as creatures possessing neither sense, honesty, nor any other virtue, such as is common to the superior animal man; but they were all more or less under the influence of the inevitable—being blind believers in fate. And since they were destined to be ruled by a woman, of what use was it to fret or chafe beneath the discipline? Rather might they be thankful that they were blessed with a sovereign so magnificent as Amrita, daughter of that man of valour, Mir Aleffo, whose spirit was already on the fiery road to paradise, accompanied by the wives who had become sati for his sake.

Mahandra had followed the fighting men into the hall, and stood by the entrance-way with an evil look on his visage. A very angry man was the Brahmin at that moment, to think that Amrita had dared to take her father's state upon herself without asking his permission to the action.

He intended her as his tool, graciously permitting her to show as the figure-head of power, whilst in reality the secret of it all lay in his own hands. Though, having this in mind, he had not troubled to assist Ratnawati in her arduous task; perhaps he had found more than enough to do on his own part; but it was distinctly displeasing to him to find affairs of such importance proceeding without any assistance from himself—without his sanction even having been asked beforehand.

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But yet more unpleasant things were in store for Mahandra, if only he had known it; though, first of all, the formula of state must be duly observed, and the fighting men swear fealty to their new ruler.

The painted trumpeter took his place behind Amrita, at the right hand of Ratnawati, and punctuated the ceremony with shrill blasts of defiance from the trumpet; whilst each man in turn raised his right hand to swear by his gods to fight to the death for the Ranee; then crouched to bite the dust at her feet, in token of submission.

They all took the oath, from the eldest to the youngest of those present, saving Mahandra, whose office was supposed to exempt him from anything of the nature of a vow. And he stood in silence surveying the scene with a fierce joy in his heart to think that his hour of triumph was at hand, when not merely Amrita, but the whole of Rasputya, would be in his power, to manipulate as he might choose.

When the ceremony of swearing and of biting the dust was at an end, there came a moment of silence, broken by the tinkling jingle of Amrita's bangles, and then by her voice — the first words that she had spoken in the hearing of her subjects. "I do not like Mahandra, the Brahmin; he is not good or true, nor does he slay in open warfare, but by cruelty and stealth."

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At this unexpected denunciation a murmur of surprise swept over the assembly of stolid robber-warriors, whilst a half-shriek of insensate rage burst from the lips of Mahandra, and was as promptly checked in its utterance, as though he disdained to show the resentment he might feel at an aspersion so serious.

"I am in the place of power," continued Amrita, her voice gathering strength as her courage increased, "and those who rule, learn many things that are hidden from the understandings of the lowly. And it hath been revealed to me, that it was not the hand of Sanita which put the poison into the bowl, whereof Mir Aleffo ate to his own undoing. But it was Mahandra who did the deed, to rid Rasputya of a Rao too strong for the priest to rule!"

The murmurs burst to a shout of execration now, and many a spear was thrust menacingly forward in the direction of the Brahmin, who, all unarmed as he was, stood in the centre of a ring of warriors, like an animal turned to bay.

But Amrita had lifted her hand to stay the spears of the fighting men, and they, having so recently taken the vow of fealty, had to obey, for the moment at least.

"Not content with this," she continued, her voice growing shrill with resentment against her enemy, "Mahandra sought to compass the destruction of the harmless white captives, whom the brave warriors

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brought as a present to that man of valour, Mir Aleffo, when Shankoash was raided and destroyed."

A howl of responsive rage greeted this statement; and thoroughly carried away by the sympathy of her audience, and her own bitter hatred of the foe she was accusing, Amrita sprang to her feet, flinging her arms aloft, whilst all her trinkets of bravery chinked and chattered with the movement. "He is a traitor, a foe to be feared, the man who strikes in the dark, and keeps his purpose hidden from his victim. And a traitor, O my fighting-men, chosen warriors of Mir Aleffo, my father! is a thing too vile to be left alive to enjoy the fresh breeze of the morning, or to welcome the coolness that follows the setting of the sun, when day is at an end. Take, then, this traitor, and slaying him in the place of dishonour, leave his unburned body for the jackals to devour, for I, Amrita, Ranee of Rasputya, hath spoken, and said it should be done!"

She sank back on to her cushions, at the conclusion of this oration, whilst a hundred hands struggled and pushed to get a hold on the prisoner, who was hustled and dragged from the hall of audience, at the imminent risk of being torn limb from limb, out towards the smashana lower down the ridge; and there he was despatched by the spear-thrusts of the warriors, and left for the prowling jackals to feast upon.

It was a kinder ending, by far, than the one he

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had meted out to his victims; but the terrible disgrace of being eaten by jackals, unburned, or even unsinged, was supposed to make the balance even. And so died Mahandra the Brahmin, priest of Rasputya, by order of Amrita, whom he had thought to make his tool.

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CHAPTER XVII.

BACK TO MAL MISTRI.

It was not long before an account of the doings on the hill reached the ears of the captives, and those who had come to rescue them. Lieutenant Lisle was for starting away without further loss of time, and getting clear of the ridge before its inhabitants had an opportunity of looking after them.

But to this course Coralie raised the most strenuous objections, declaring it to be dangerous in the extreme to incite Amrita's fighting men to anger, and perhaps to bloodshed, when a little wise diplomacy might enable them to depart in peace.

There was another motive in her heart also, though she was too shy and reserved to speak of it to the young officer who claimed to be her kinsman in such a round-about fashion. She had talked so much to Amrita of the love of the Christian's God, and had striven so hard to instil into her dark heart the primary truths of religion, that it seemed to her like the undoing of all her previous endeavour, to steal away from Rasputya like a fugitive.

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To the surprise of Lieutenant Lisle, Corporal Bell sided with Coralie, declaring that there was no sense or reason in raising the anger of these Rasputyan raiders, even offering to go himself to the new Ranee, to ask at her hands the favour of permission to take the captives away.

But eventually it was Lieutenant Lisle on whom the ambassage fell, and, accompanied by two Sikhs as protection, and Coralie herself as interpreter, he made his way up the steep hill path, past the frowning wall of Amrita's stronghold.

Coralie had grown very fast during the months since she had been a prisoner on the ridge, with the result that her scanty wardrobe was sadly inadequate at the present time, a drawback of which no one could be so conscious as she was herself. An angular, over-grown girl she looked as she stepped lightly and nimbly over the rough, rocky path, the easy grace of her swinging gait taking away half the disadvantages arising from her shabby and insufficient apparelling.

Amrita was graciously pleased to be "at home" to the visitors, and received them in the same apartment in which she had pronounced the doom of Mahandra, and which, indeed, she had not left. The novelty of her new position was too delightful for her to care to lay aside her state yet, and so she had remained enthroned upon her cushions. Ratnawati, proud and pleased, danced attendance

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upon her, as people, many and various, came to crave favours at her hands—none of which were refused by the new ruler of the ridge.

Lieutenant Lisle, being uncertain as to the etiquette proper for the occasion, lifted his sun helmet, and bowed with great deference to the Ranee upon being ushered into her presence, but Coralie walked straight up to her, and, patting her upon the arm, said cheerily, "Well done, Amrita, your hands, and face too are much cleaner than when I saw you last, and your jewels look very nice."

The Ranee smiled, dimpled, and chuckled with pleasure over this approval of her friend, then, pointing to the officer, asked who that stranger was, and why he had come to Rasputya.

"That is Lieutenant Lisle, a soldier of *Kaiser-i-Hind,* and a kinsman of my own, at least he says so," replied Coralie, not quite certain herself as to the correctness of the relationship claimed.

A gleam of suspicion came into Amrita's eyes. "Why is he here?" she demanded, in an autocratic manner.

"He has come to take us back to our own country," replied Coralie, stoutly, and gazing with a calm aspect into the other's face, though her heart beat quickly, and there was a surging, singing sort of noise in her ears, as of many waters.

"But I want you to stay here. And I shall not let you go," retorted the Ranee, in hot displeasure.

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Coralie translated her reply to the lieutenant, asking what she should say next.

"Tell her that the British Government will send a hundred cannon to blow this old ridge into a million bits, and make sausage-meat of her and her fighting men," suggested the lieutenant.

Coralie shook her head, with an air of dissent. "You don't know Amrita so well as I do; to say a thing like that would only make her the more resolved to keep us. Shall I ask her to let mother and Susette go, whilst I remain here? She will consent to that, I believe."

"I daresay she would, but I should not. I don't intend leaving this delightful locality unless you come too, Cousin Coralie, and you can tell the lady so, if you choose," he answered, with a smile and a bow, that immediately took the fancy of Amrita, who was watching them intently.

"What makes him bend his body in that way?" she asked, and, when Coralie explained, she laughed, and clapped her hands in childish glee, begging that he would do it again.

But Lieutenant Lisle was wise in his generation, and stood as erect and stiff as a telegraph post. "Tell the lady that if she will consent to your leaving Rasputya under our escort I will bow to her for fifteen minutes straight off, and I will, in addition, instruct that fellow with the trumpet to bow with as much ease and grace as a French dancing-master."

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Coralie repeated the words to Amrita, who, however, only pouted, and again insisted that she could not let the captives leave the ridge.

"You shall invoke the spirit that is in the box for me. And I will give you slaves to do your bidding," she said in a coaxing tone to Coralie.

"But the box, and the spirit likewise, were suttee for Mir Aleffo," explained Coralie; "they are burned to ashes, and you can never hear the music again."

Amrita's face wore a look of such extreme disappointment and chagrin, that Lieutenant Lisle asked what was amiss with her; and then when it was explained to him, hit on a happy idea, which saved the situation.

"We will send her a barrel-organ, the best that can be bought for money in London; then all she will have to do will be to turn the handle!" he cried, in the boyish exuberance of spirits, that was apt to characterise him when things bade fair to fall out as he desired.

Amrita rose at once to this tempting bait, and graciously gave her permission to the departure of the white captives from her territory; and not to be outdone by this heathen princess in the matter of generosity, Lieutenant Lisle rashly asked her what else there was that she would like to have as a present from the friends of the captives she was about to release.

"I want the clothes he is wearing, to dress my

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trumpeter in," was the prompt but unexpected reply to this, and Coralie with difficulty repressed a laugh, as she translated for the lieutenant's benefit. The idea of a bare-footed trumpeter of Rasputya stalking about in the uniform of a British officer was much too ludicrous to be received with gravity.

Lieutenant Lisle himself just roared with merriment, when the Ranee's request was made known to him; and Amrita, seeing the mirth her wish evoked, laughed also, and was vastly pleased with herself, and in consequence with everyone else also.

In the end, Lieutenant Lisle promised to send garments for the trumpeter, which should far surpass in magnificence any uniform that ever was seen, which promise he afterwards fulfilled, by purchasing a clown's outfit, all patches and spangles, a masterpiece of tinsel and of glitter, arrayed in which the trumpeter of Rasputya became the most admired personage in all the country round, the Ranee herself not excepted,—but that is anticipating.

Poor Mrs. Blake was in such a condition of collapse, that it seemed very doubtful whether she could be moved at all. But in the end, a sort of rough cage, or cradle, was formed to sling between the two baggage camels, and in this, on the next morning, the poor lady was placed. Coralie and Susette were mounted on improvised saddles, and seated one upon either camel, whilst the litter containing their mother swung between.

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Amrita parted from them with grief and tears, but Ratnawati showed two rows of sparkling white teeth in broad grins of congratulation.

"Ratnawati sorry, no see Missi, yet she glad Missi go!" cried the Ranee's faithful waiting woman.

"Ah, we should not be going at all, if it had not been for you sending the warning to Mal Mistri," said Coralie, the quick tears of gratitude springing to her eyes.

"Hush-sh-sh, Missi no say things like that!" said the black woman warningly, "or the Ranee, she throw poor Ratnawati unburned to the jackals, and so she be dishonoured for ever, like Mahandra the wicked one."

"I promise I'll keep the secret, but I'm thankful to you all the same," replied Coralie; and then the farewells being all said, she was assisted to her perch upon the camel's back, and the return journey to Mal Mistri was begun.

It was of necessity very slow travelling, and it was hours before the sombre outlines of the ridge dropped below the horizon, and were lost to view. Coralie's gaze lingered with a yearning pain round the cleft in the ridge, where her father's grave had been made, and one or two burning tears forced themselves from her eyes to roll slowly down her cheeks, as she thought of the heroic purpose for which he had given his life a sacrifice.

Mrs. Blake was still unconscious of aught that

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was happening around her. She was not delirious, as one ill with fever might have been, but over her brain there had dropped a cloud, obscuring her faculties of reason and judgment, so that she knew nothing of the rescue that had come for herself and her daughters.

Coralie and Susette ministered to her in all possible ways, but it was not much that they could do; she seemed to have few wants, and spent most of the journey lying back with closed eyes in her litter.

The whole party were travel-worn and weary to the point of exhaustion, when at length one evening a little before sunset, Corporal Bell pointed away across the desert to where a dark speck showed against the sky-line. "Yonder is Mal Mistri, Miss Blake, and the end of your journey."

Coralie looked at the distant speck, and sighed, because it was so far off; she was so tired of the bumping, jolting motion of the camel, that the prospect of having to bear it for a few hours longer was by no means exhilarating.

"How much further will it be to England?" piped the anxious voice of Susette from the other camel. Her health had improved steadily ever since they left the ridge of Rasputya; but fatigue still made her irritable and querulous, and her tones had a peevish ring.

Lieutenant Lisle, who was riding on the other

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side, laughed at the question. "Oh, it is not much more than fifty times further than the distance we have covered since leaving the ridge," he said, with some private amusement over the dismayed expression of Susette's small, flower-like face.

"I do hate travelling so much," she sighed; "it is the next bad thing to being a prisoner in Rasputya; but perhaps a ship, or a train, do not tire one so much as a camel."

"Wait until you have made a few trips on an ocean liner, or in a Pullman car, before you say that travelling is horrid, little cousin; your experience is not half ripe enough for judgment yet," remarked the young man, with a rather patronising air, which provoked Susette to anger.

"Of course you know more of life than I do, but that is only because you are older, and have had more advantages; and it is no excuse at all for the adoption of such superior airs."

"I am very sorry to have offended you," he replied, suppressing his amusement with great difficulty, as he noted the angle at which she carried her head, and the dignified pose of her little person.

"I will forgive you this time," she responded graciously; and then experienced a momentary return of her anger, because of the laughter in which he immediately indulged.

Poor Coralie, on her bumping and jolting steed, was too weary to pay any heed to the talk of the

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others; but the laughter got upon her nerves, and hurt them. Freedom from captivity seemed no such great boon after all, since it involved such terrible fatigue. And Mrs. Blake, lying unconscious in the swaying litter, had perhaps the best of it, since she could not understand—could not suffer even—save in a vague unknowing way, what the others had been forced to endure.

Mal Mistri was looming nearer, and bigger; the report of a gun rang through the clear air, and the approaching travellers knew that they were seen, and recognised.

"Seems as if they've a jollification of some sort on hand," remarked the lieutenant, as he peered across the slowly lessening distance to the grim outlines of the desert-stronghold. "There's a flag flying; that certainly was not there when we started."

"Good news perhaps, sir," speculated Corporal Bell, in a dreamy tone; the remark had been made to him, and in answering it his thoughts had gone off in a maze of wonderment as to the most probable shape the tidings might be disposed to take.

But neither he nor his companion guessed anywhere near to reason why Major Sutcliffe had decked the fort with flags; nor could they be expected to fathom the immense importance it would prove to the rescued captives of Rasputya.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

STRANGE TIDINGS.

A HEARTY welcome awaited the travellers; but Coralie knew little more about it than Mrs. Blake herself.

So difficult had the task of holding on become, that when the gates of Mal Mistri were reached, it was impossible to do anything else, and she was lifted down, helpless as an infant, to lose all remembrance of past pain or present comfort, until some length of time had passed, and Major Sutcliffe was growing decidedly anxious concerning her long swoon.

She had only fainted from fatigue, however, and a long rest worked miracles of re-invigoration upon her. Whilst Susette, less worn by weariness than her sister, waltzed all over the gloomy old fort in ecstatic delight at finding herself amid civilised surroundings once more; and even Mrs. Blake displayed some faint signs of intelligence that fortune for them all had changed for the better.

But Major Sutcliffe had decided that for her, at least, a doctor was an urgent necessity, and had

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already telegraphed to Kurrachee for medical aid; detailing such of her symptoms as he had already made himself acquainted with, and making his own observations upon the same.

Recovering her balance of reasoning power with the lessoning of her fatigue, Coralie at once determined to unburden herself to the major, anent the secret she believed known only to herself concerning the smuggling of arms from England, up the Rasputya water-way.

Taking advantage of Susette's exhaustive inspection of the fort, and all pertaining thereto, Coralie made her way to the little room where Major Sutcliffe sat preparing an official report of the expedition into Rasputyan territory, and timidly asked if she might speak to him quite alone.

That gentleman looked considerably surprised, and darted a suspicious look at Lieutenant Lisle, who was assisting with the report, almost as if he thought the young man had been giving Miss Blake some cause for complaint.

But that officer's face merely reflected the surprise on his own, so he dismissed him with a nod, and turned to Coralie. "Well, young lady, and what is this weighty secret which seems to be so burdensome to you?"

She looked at the door and the window, both of which remained open, and asked, dubiously: "Are you certain, sir, that no one can hear what we say?"

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"No, I am not. But I soon will be," he replied, with a smile; putting out his hand and making the window fast, then going to the door and rendering that equally secure.

"There, you need have no fear now of eavesdroppers,—unless you shout, that is, in which case I cannot warrant the privacy of the matter, as the walls are thin in places. But is the communication so very important?"

"The attempt to make it cost my father his life," replied Coralie, coldly, resenting a little the half-mocking tone of the other, as he asked his question.

"Hey, what?" demanded the major, thoroughly roused now by the solemnity of her manner, and the words she uttered.

Controlling her voice by an effort, she told him the whole story of her father's discovery, and the resolution he had come to of making it known to the British Government. It was hard work to keep her tone steady when it came to the describing of the finding of his body among the rocks in the cleft of the ridge. But she was by nature brave, whilst the discipline of her life had been such as begets self-control even in the weakest.

The major's first question at the close of her story was sufficiently disconcerting. "Miss Blake, are you certain that it was the body of your father which the mohanas found?"

"It was his body; it must have been. The clothes

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were the same, and — and the shoes," she gasped, a little sob catching at her voice, as she remembered the incident of the patch he had put on himself.

"The clothes! Ah, yes, but the clothes are not the man. Did you recognise the features, Miss Blake?" and the major held her in a keen scrutiny as he put the question.

"They were beyond recognition by that time," she answered in a low tone, shivering a little at thought of the earth-to-earth committal of those poor fragments of mortality, and the cairn they had piled over his grave.

"It might have been your father, of course; probably it was," added Major Sutcliffe hastily, feeling he dared not raise hopes, which, after all, had no foundation in fact.

Coralie caught her breath, in a valiant effort to suppress another sob. "Why do you ask, sir?" she said, in surprise.

"Because—" the first word uttered, the major stopped short, as if revolving within himself the expediency of making the intended communication, but it was only a momentary hesitation, then he continued, "it was only yesterday that this same information was wired to me from headquarters, every detail agreeing with the story you have told me, excepting, of course, the part concerning your father's death."

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Coralie looked at him in frightened amazement, hardly crediting as yet the evidence of her senses. "But who—who gave the information in at headquarters?" she stammered, and then, because she trembled so excessively, was forced to sit down upon the floor, there being no other seat in the room, saving the high desk stool which the major had vacated to stand and talk with her.

"I do not know, but I will telegraph at once and ask. That is, if you will prove yourself a sensible young lady, and not faint," he replied, in a pointed manner, for her cheeks had grown colourless, and her eyes still had a fixed, dazed look that made him uncomfortable.

"I shall not faint," she retorted, giving herself a shake by way of rallying her forces again, then she asked, eagerly, "How long would it be before you could hear, sir, from headquarters?"

"That I cannot tell, but I promise to send for you at once, when I do. Only remember, the secret must be a secret still," he said gravely.

"I am not likely to forget that after having kept it so long," she replied; then, picking herself slowly up from the floor, went away to her mother, to wait, with what patience she could, until the reply should come to the major's telegram.

It was evening before it arrived, the evening of the longest day Coralie had ever lived through. And when the summons came for her to the pres-

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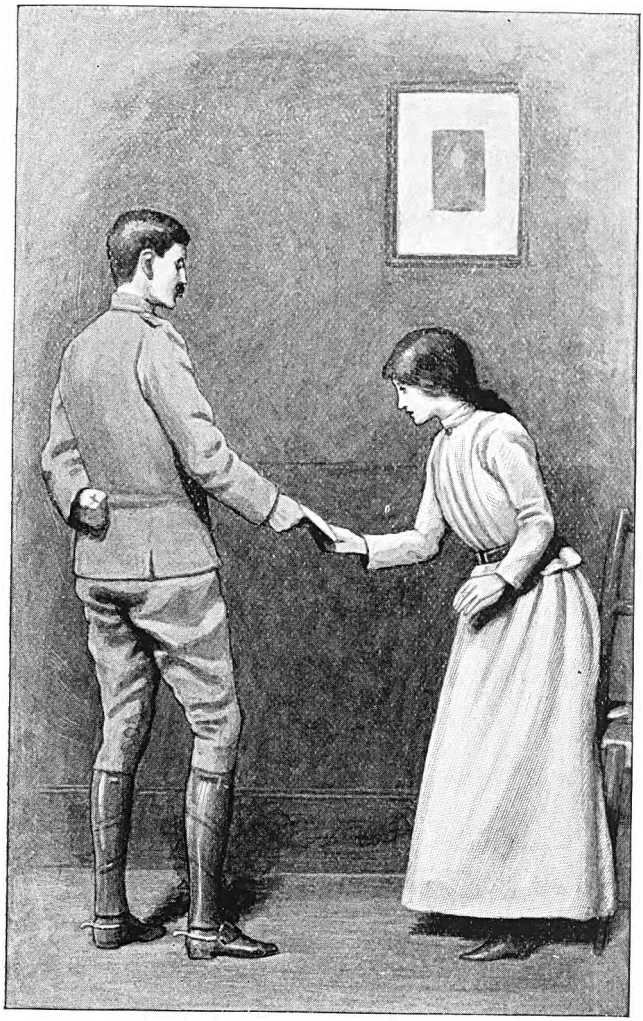

"I am afraid the information does not amount to much," said Major Sutcliffe, kindly.—*p.* 175.

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ence of Major Sutcliffe, her trembling limbs almost refused to bear her thither.

The officer's face wore a mystified expression, as he motioned her to a seat, which he had thoughtfully provided for her accommodation since her visit in the morning.

"I am afraid the information does not amount to much, Miss Blake," he said, kindly, holding out to her the message he had just received.

But the lines swam before her eyes when she tried to read, and she was compelled to hand it back to him, saying in a pained tone, "I—I can't read it."

He took it from her, his gesture betraying some latent impatience, then read aloud,—

"'Information *re* smuggled arms for India, with tidings of expected rising of the federated tribes, handed in at the War Office by Jasper Brown, of Camden Town, who found the same in a Bible, packed among his brother's effects, brought home from the Persian Gulf by the barque *Lucy Jane*, said brother having died at sea.'"

"That is the name of the vessel which brought the cargo of rifles and ammunition to the ridge of Rasputya," she said, pressing one hand upon her heart to still its painful throbbing.

The major nodded.

"Yes, I too remarked that coincidence. You have no friends or relatives at that place, Camden Town,

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I presume?" he asked, flapping the paper softly against one hand.

"No, I have never even heard the name before," she said, dreamily; then, after a minute of silence, exclaimed, "I wish, oh, how much I wish that I could see that paper."

"It would be quite possible, of course; you are going to London as soon as your mother is fit to travel, and they will be only too thankful at the War Office if you can furnish them with any information of a reliable character," he answered, soothingly, more sorry for her disappointment than he would have cared to own, he being a man of a cold, hard exterior, who disdained to display any softness that by chance might lurk within.

Coralie sighed, and was silent, whilst the wild unreasoning hopes that had sprung to life in her breast that day, died, one by one, a painful and untimely death.

"We were greatly elated by the tidings when it came," went on the major, talking now merely to give her space in which to recover herself. "For a long time past, our suspicions have amounted to certainties almost, that a traffic in arms was going on between the home ports and our enemies over the border. For there was absolutely no other way, saving by smuggling, in which these savages could have become possessed of the newest-patterned improvements in rifles and cartridges. And so, when

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the news came, we went in for a small rejoicing on our own account, and hung out flags to celebrate the event."

"Yes," replied Coralie, in a dull tone, although in reality she had heard not a single word of the major's remarks. And then, rising from her seat, she thanked him, and went back to her mother, to commence her waiting anew, only with this difference, that now her hope had fled.

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CHAPTER XIX.

UNCLE JOE.

FROM Mal Mistri, in the Rann of Cutch, to a smart flat in Piccadilly is rather a big jump, and fully six weeks had gone by since Coralie had heard with sickening disappointment of the manner in which news of the smuggled arms had reached the War Office.

The doctor from Kurrachee had decided that Mrs. Blake needed the care of a specialist, and had advised her removal to London with the least possible delay.

Then came the question of funds, for the Blakes were penniless; and Lieutenant Lisle telegraphed to Mr. Joseph Blake, of Tupton Magna, the sore need of his brother's widow and orphans, receiving in reply *carte blanche* to provide for their necessities, and to escort them himself to England if he could obtain leave for the purpose.

The telegraph was set in motion again, and the request for leave duly presented in the proper quarter, with detailed explanations for the same. It was expensive, certainly, but since it could be

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paid for by Uncle Joe, and not be a tax on Lieutenant Lisle's rather slender resources, this did not much matter.

Most things come easily to those who can bring money and influence to bear on the getting of what they want, and a gracious permission was accorded the young officer to escort the whilom captives of Rasputya safely to the abode of their kinsman in England. Then followed the journey by land and sea, a novel experience truly for the two girls, who had been roughing it so long on the ridge of Rasputya. Indeed, the luxury-loving Susette felt as if the Elysian fields had been gained, so much more delightful was the experience than even her wildest fancy had painted.

But for Coralie, much as she appreciated the changed condition of their surroundings, there was no rest, and no freedom from care, such as alone makes enjoyment possible. The condition of Mrs. Blake was in a measure a cause for this, but beyond it, and underlying all else, was her anxiety about her father's fate.

He might be dead. Reviewing all the circumstances attendant on the finding of the decomposed body at the cleft of the ridge, she could not see the slightest ground for suspicion that she had been mistaken in her identity. And yet—and yet, deep down in her heart, hope, like some blithe bird was singing, and whiling away the tedious

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hours of her waiting, with promise of brighter days to come.

Uncle Joe, who was waiting in London to welcome them, felt drawn at once to his grave-eyed elder niece with a curious feeling of comradeship, more typical of the relations between brother and sister than those of uncle and niece.

Mrs. Richard Blake, the mother of Lieutenant Lisle, was with Uncle Joe, and she without hesitation, attributed Coralie's sombre gravity of aspect to the strain of the past few months, which, though natural enough, did not altogether account for the haggard expression of care that made her look old so early.

Lieutenant Lisle's mother—Aunt Grace the girls called her—took possession of poor irresponsible Mrs. John Blake, found a nurse for her, arranged every detail for her comfort whilst she should remain in town under care of the specialist, and, by so doing, lifted a whole load of care from the shoulders of Coralie, who was thus left free to carry out her cherished plan of interrogating the authorities at the War Office.

For this purpose she had, before leaving Mal Mistri, begged a letter of introduction from Major Sutcliffe to that particular big-wig to whom it would be necessary to apply. At her request, too, the matter, so far as it related to herself, was kept a profound secret for the present, no one knowing of

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it but the major, until, upon her arrival in London, it became necessary to take Uncle Joe into confidence.

That gentleman, although greatly startled and surprised, was not so sceptical as Coralie had feared he would be. Indeed, after the first amazement was over, he seemed more inclined to hope than she herself had dared to do.

Thus it came about that one cold day at the end of January, the very end, for it was the thirty-first—a date that Coralie would never forget if she lived to be a hundred years old—uncle and niece found themselves in a private room at the War Office, having an interview with a solemn-faced personage in a very high, and very stiff, collar, who was the big-wig to whom Major Sutcliffe had given her the letter of introduction.

He was not so awfully unapproachable as at first sight he had appeared to be, and, when her shyness wore away a little, Coralie found him rather nice than otherwise.

Of course he asked her a great many questions, but then he listened with such deferential attention to the answers, that it made the balance even. And when, in fear and trembling, she made her request to be allowed to see the letter which had given the first intimation to the authorities, he acceded without one single murmur of protest even.

But when the crumpled, dirty paper was placed in her hands, and her glance fell on the scrawled

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writing, she gave a sharp cry, which brought Uncle Joe to her side, just in time to prevent her from falling. She did not faint, however; it was only a momentary paralyzing of limbs and speech; and in a minute or two she was able to sit erect again, whilst she gasped, in faltering accents, "That is my father's handwriting; I should know it any where."

"Are you sure?" demanded Uncle Joe, forgetting for the moment the presence of the big-wig, as he took the paper from the hands of his niece, and scanned it with great intentness.

"I am positive," said Coralie, in a tone of earnest conviction.

"Ah, yes, it is John's writing, poor dear fellow, and he may be alive now, but where?" and Mr. Joseph Blake sighed heavily, as he handed the paper back to the big-wig.

But before that gentleman could take it, Coralie intervened, saying, in a pleading tone, "Oh, please, may I not have it again; there may be some clue in it to tell us where to look for him!"

"My poor child," said the big-wig, in a tone of great compassion, "can you not understand that, even if your father did write that paper, he must have perished long since, or he would most assuredly have made his existence known to his family."

"Oh, no, no! that is just what he would not dare to do for our sakes, unless he was certain we had

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been rescued. Because, if anyone in Rasputya, or among the federated tribes, heard that he was alive, their suspicions would have been aroused, and we should have been put to death, the cruellest that could have been devised," cried Coralie, with a retrospective shiver, as she thought of Mahandra.

"But how could he have got on board the *Lucy Jane* at all? According to you, Coralie, that was the name of the first vessel that came up the Rasputya water-way, and which left again some time before your father disappeared?"

"I don't know any more than you, Uncle Joe, but that paper was written by father, I am sure. And I must see the Bible in which it was found. Major Sutcliffe said the letter was found in the dead sailor's Bible, didn't he?" and she looked to the big-wig for confirmation.

That gentleman bowed gravely; and no one by looking at him, could have told at all whether he was deeply interested by the tragedy being unfolded before him, or terribly bored by the long-drawn tediousness of the interview.

"I can give you the address of the man who brought the letter here; indeed he has been under police surveillance ever since," he said, breaking a strained silence, wherein Coralie and her uncle had looked at each other, in ever-increasing trouble and perplexity.

"Thank you," said Mr. Joseph Blake, promptly,

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and then turning to his niece, he said, "Come, Coralie, let us go there now."

"May I take this?" she asked, touching the paper.

But the big-wig was dubious, and temporised, saying that he should be most happy to let her see it again whenever she wished, but for the present, "um-er-er-um," perhaps it was as well that the War Office should retain possession of it. And with this she was fain to be content.

It was a long drive to Camden Town; Uncle Joe tried to persuade Coralie to lunch *en route*, but she was too excited to think of food just then, and he, having caught the infection of her unrest, had no appetite either.

Jasper Brown, 10 Park Place, Camden Town, was the address furnished them by the big-wig. But there was very little park about it saving the name, it being a dreary little *cul de sac*, crouching under the shadow of a huge iron works, where, doubtless, the dwellers in Park Place found employment.

Number 10 was the very last house of the row, and built right under the towering shadow of the tall factory. Looking at it on that dreary 31st of January, Coralie decided that, on the whole, she would prefer to dwell on the ridge of Rasputya all her days, than be compelled to drag out an airless, lightless existence in the dingy purlieus of Camden Town. For, at least, fresh air and sunshine were to be had in abundance in the desert,

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whilst here—why, even the children had no merriment, and the very street dogs wore a languid air of fretful, discontented limitation.

Mrs. Jasper Brown was a worn, washed-out little woman, who carried a sickly, wailing infant in her arms, and talked largely of Mr. Brown's likes and dislikes, in the matter of giving up the dead sailor's Bible to these strangers.

Sweet-tempered and patient though he was, Mr. Joseph Blake soon had more than enough of this kind of thing, and demanded that Jasper Brown should be sent for, and personally interrogated concerning his willingness to part with the book.

"But he cawn't afford to come home in work-hours; it would lose him time," objected Mrs. Brown.

"I will pay him for the time he loses," retorted Uncle Joe, suggestively jingling some coins up and down in his pockets.

"But I've no one to send," persisted the woman, who seemed possessed of as many objections as porcupines have quills.

"Go yourself," he said hastily, yet with such unmistakable command in his tone, that the other's instincts of free-born citizenship were at once aroused and alarmed, and she commenced on a shrill disclaimer of any intentions towards obedience.

"I cawn't leave my house to go. I don't know you; why, saving your pardon for mentioning such a thing, I might find you gawn, and my best tea-

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pot with you," she retorted; and the insinuation against his respectability so tickled Uncle Joe, that he laughed heartily, as he drew a half-crown from his pocket, and commenced a retreat to the outer door.

"Here, take this to pay your husband for the loss of time," he said, tendering the half-crown for her acceptance. "And whilst you are gone, my niece and I will wait in the cab. You can lock the door and take the key with you; your teapot then will be in no danger."

The sight of the money went far towards restoring the woman's confidence; and she would fain have apologised and left them in the house; but on this point Mr. Joseph Blake was obdurate, and insisted on repairing with Coralie to the cab, whilst Mrs. Brown pelted away with all haste to summon her husband home, or get his consent to the strangers taking the dead sailor's Bible away.

Uncle Joe was laughing still; for, despite his deformity, and consequent physical disability, he had a merry heart, and a keen sense of humour; and Mrs. Brown's openly expressed fear for her teapot was still too much for his risible faculties.

But Coralie did not laugh, only sat in the cab with clasped hands, staring straight out before her, yet seeing nothing; her gaze being turned inwards upon her remembrance of the Rasputya tragedy, and the supposed finding of her father's body.

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CHAPTER XX.

JIM BROWN'S BIBLE.

AFTER a short absence, Mrs. Brown returned, decidedly out of breath with the haste she had made in doing her errand. The infant, which she had taken with her, had ceased wailing now, and was contentedly sucking its fist, as if the little impromptu expedition had been very much to its mind.

"Jasper says he cawn't come home to see you, sir, if you will kindly excuse it, as they're very busy at the works just now, and the foreman won't let him away. But he says you are quite welcome to poor Jim's Bible, though it is but a shabby one, and most sadly knocked about," Mrs. Brown said, with great demonstration of respect. The half-crown had done its work most effectually; its influence remaining potent still.

Mr. Joseph Blake got out of the cab and walked into the house again, followed eagerly by Coralie.

"How much money do you require for it?" he asked, when the dirty volume was produced, and handed to him.

Mrs. Brown looked sharply at him—being London

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born and bred, she was not wanting in wit or shrewdness, as her answer showed plainly enough: "I'll take for it, sir, what it is worth to you," she retorted.

Mr. Joseph Blake shook his head slowly. "It may be worth a great deal; or, on the other hand, it may be worth nothing at all. Will you take ten shillings for it; and then, if it proves to us what we hope for in buying it, we will gladly double the price to you?"

The tired woman's eyes brightened. Ten shillings seemed wonderfully munificent reward for that shabby old Bible, and she consented hastily, as if fearful of the gentleman drawing back from his bargain.

"Can you tell us what part of the Bible the letter was found, Mrs. Brown?" asked Coralie, with dry lips, her face looking more white and wan than ever.

"Yes, Miss, that I can. Jasper and me both noticed it, feeling thankful that poor Jim, who had been most uncommon wild, had taken to using his Bible before death overtook him. The letter, which was sewed up in a piece of thin paper, was pinned in at the ninetieth Psalm."

"Ah!" ejaculated Coralie, with a little gasp, and then with hasty fingers she turned the greasy, dirty pages, that smelled so strongly of stale tobacco, pitch, and similar abominations.

A leaf had been torn away—whether by accident,

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or of set purpose, she could not determine; and the ninetieth Psalm, showing the marks where the pin had been stuck in, faced Psalm eighty—the last sentence in the last verse of which was underlined—"We shall be saved;" whilst here and there about the page Coralie detected black dots, which made her heart beat furiously, and sent the blood in a rush of crimson to her face.

Mr. Joseph Blake detected her emotion, and, slipping the ten shillings into Mrs. Brown's dingy palm, asked his niece if she was ready to depart.

For answer, Coralie nodded, turning her back on Mrs. Brown, whose keen eyes were peering intently into her face.

When back in the cab again, with Park Place rapidly receding into the distance, she turned to her uncle, pointing a trembling finger to the page on which the eightieth Psalm was printed.

"Uncle Joe, it is a message from father, I am sure it is, if only we can get the clue to it," cried the poor girl.

"Are you sure they are not just accidental spots?" he asked, scanning the page with anxious eyes.

"No, no, I am sure it is a message; and the paper being pinned in at the ninetieth Psalm was not chance either. That verse—'Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations'—was the one father was always so fond of quoting; he translated the hymn which matched it into Sindhi, whilst we

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lived at Shankoash," she replied, earnestly, looking still at the minute specks on the black page, and vainly endeavouring to find a clue to the reading of the mystery.

"What hymn, child?" asked the other, absently, as he too studied the dots, yet with no better success than hers.

"'O, God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,'"

she answered, promptly; thinking of the critical times in her short life, when the singing of that hymn had seemed like a charm ushering in some wonderful interposition of Divine Providence.

But Mr. Joseph Blake was still absorbed, and seemed not to heed her words. Presently, he drew the Bible from her grasp, and studied the open page in silence, until the long drive was ended, and they found themselves in the Piccadilly quarter once more.

He carried the Bible off to his room with him then; and she did not see him, or the volume either, again until dinner.

The specialist paid a long visit to his patient that day; and afterwards was some time closeted with Mrs. Richard Blake. When he had gone, that lady came in search of Coralie—her face radiant, her eyes beaming with hope.

"Coralie, are you ready for good news?" she said, sitting down by the poor girl, who just then

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was feeling dismally depressed and miserable, having missed her luncheon, and being physically tired likewise.

"Is it really good news, Aunt Grace?" she asked, turning a wistful face towards the cheerful countenance of her aunt.

"Indeed it is. Dr. Conyngham says that he hopes in a few weeks your mother will be perfectly restored," rejoined Mrs. Richard Blake, sitting down beside her niece, and gathering one of Coralie's limp, unresisting hands into her own grasp.

Coralie tried to be glad, and to smile; but oh, the burden of the other trouble, and the terrible uncertainty of it all, weighed so heavily upon her that she had no heart to rejoice; and, instead, laid her weary head down on Aunt Grace's kind arm, and burst into grievous weeping.

Mrs. Richard Blake was greatly distressed, for it was plainly evident that these were not tears of joy and relief which her niece was shedding, but bitter and regretful sorrow, the nature of which she had no knowledge to fathom.

And then, by slow degrees, a little at a time, the story was told again; for, having broken down so thoroughly in presence of her aunt, there seemed no other way for Coralie but to take her into confidence altogether.

Mrs. Richard Blake listened in silence to the end, and then she shook her head. "Coralie, my dear

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child, I cannot see that you have the slightest ground for hope; and this terrible suspense in which you live will wear you out, and make you ill. If your father had survived we should have heard of him before now."

"I know, Aunt Grace, how hopeless it must seem to you, and to everybody, though Uncle Joe hopes as strongly as I do. But that Bible holds some clue,—I am sure it does, if only we can find it out,"—and she sighed pathetically over the incomprehensible mystery.

At dinner that night, Mr. Joseph Blake was very silent—almost taciturn indeed—and when it was over, and the two girls were going away with their aunt to the drawing-room, he stayed Coralie with a motion of his hand.

"I want to speak to you," he said, quietly; and then the door closed on the other two, and they were left alone.

"Uncle Joe, what is it?" she gasped, going white to her lips.

"Nothing to look so frightened about; but stay, I will bring that Bible here," and he left the room hurriedly, to enter his bed-room, which was on the other side of the passage, returning a minute later with the book in his hand.

"Now, Coralie, look here," he said, placing the open page before her. "These dots points to letters which make words, but they convey no sense to

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the ordinary mind, because you have to begin at the bottom and work upwards. At least, that is my idea, and the only way in which I have been able to make any sense of it."

"Yes, yes," she gasped, almost sobbed, regarding her uncle at that moment as being possessed of the most marvellous and superhuman powers, because he had mastered this mystery of specks and dots.

"Well, I have taken the letters as they came, each letter that had a mark under it, you understand, and this is the message that I discovered." As he spoke he drew a paper from his pocket and placed it before her.

But she could not read it. The writing on the page see-sawed up and down in the most disagreeable fashion; and she gave it back to her uncle, interjecting in a choked tone, "Read it to me, please!"

He took the paper, laid it on the table, smoothing out the creases with quite maddening deliberation, then he began,—

"'I, John Blake, am not dead, but a prisoner on board the *Shooting Star*, save my wife and children if you can.'"

"He is not dead!" cried Coralie, a dark load of grief lifted suddenly from her heart.

"He *was* not," corrected Uncle Joe, slowly, with such cautious emphasis, that she looked at him in alarm.

"But you fear—?" and then words failed her,

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so that she could only look at him in her all-devouring anxiety.

"It is a long while—months ago—and if he was a prisoner, don't you see?"

She nodded her head, and chill despair crept into her heart; but Mr. Joseph Blake continued more cheerfully.

"However, I'll set the police at work, and we'll run down that craft, the *Shooting Star*, and overhaul her pretty closely, too. It shall be our quest to find him, Coralie, and we will do it, too, if he is still alive—God helping us—even though it should take the last penny of my fortune to do it."

His manner was so solemn that it sounded as if he were taking a vow. And Coralie was comforted, because she knew he would keep his word.

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CHAPTER XXI.

THE CAPTAIN OF THE "SHOOTING STAR."

THE next morning, as Mr. Joseph Blake took his breakfast and his morning paper at one and the same time, preparatory to paying a visit to Scotland Yard on behalf of his missing brother, an item in the shipping list arrested his attention. It was among the vessels entered inwards, and read as follows:—

"*Shooting Star* (s.), Persian Gulf. Martin & Salter."

"Is it possible?" he exclaimed, in such astonishment that Mrs. Richard Blake, who presided behind the coffee-urn, asked hurriedly what was the matter with him, or what there was in the paper to move him so greatly.

"Only a coincidence," he replied with a smile, for he did not know that Coralie had taken Aunt Grace into her confidence, and, besides, Susette was with them at table.

"Where is Coralie; isn't she well?" he asked a moment later, after a little more staring at that item in the shipping list. He was noticing now for the first time that his elder niece's chair was still empty.

"Yes, Uncle Joe, she is very well, only rather

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lazy this morning," Susette answered with a laugh; she was looking as fresh as a spring daisy herself. And Lieutenant Lisle, who had just come in, was indulging in some cousinly chaff at her expense.

"I am afraid Cousin Coralie is not improving," he said, with a solemn shake of his head. "Not merely is she becoming slothful in the matter of rising in the morning, but she is uncertain in temper likewise, and flew all to pieces with me last night, when I was trying to compliment her on her solemnity of deportment."

"Cuthbert, you should not tease the poor child, it is not kind," said his mother reproachfully, whereupon he assumed an air of mock penitence, and pretended keen distress for his fault.

Susette was laughing at him, and telling him not to be so foolish, when the door opened, and Coralie entered, looking pale and heavy-eyed, just as if she had scarcely slept at all.

"Come here, Coralie," said her uncle, drawing up a chair for her close to his own. She took it languidly, and began her breakfast, yet eating with little or no appetite, whilst Lieutenant Lisle was urging his mother to go somewhere with him that day, taking the two girls with her.

"Not Coralie, if you please; she and I are going on a small expedition of our own," said Mr. Joseph Blake, in a decided tone, and Coralie looked up at him with a sudden interest in her eyes.

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He smiled back at her in an encouraging fashion, but said no more. And she forebore to question him, guessing that the outing, whatever it was, had something to do with that secret quest of theirs, which might not be openly discussed. But her breakfast tasted better after that, and a drift of colour came into her pale cheeks, and stayed there.

"That vessel, the *Shooting Star*, is in port; would you like to go and have a look at her with me to-day, Coralie?" asked Mr. Joseph Blake, when the others had left the table.

An incredulous amazement flashed into her eyes, and for a moment her face was radiant with hope, then it faded again, for she had been disappointed so many times. "Yes, I should like to go with you; but you don't think he is there now, do you, Uncle Joe?"

"No, scarcely; but we may find a clue of some kind, you know," he replied, hopefully; and then he sent her away to get her hat and coat, saying they had better lose no time in setting out, as the morning would prove all too short for what there was to be done in it.

Before starting, however, Coralie had to comfort Susette, who was in a state of pouting discontent because Uncle Joe was always preferring her sister's company to hers. Even shedding tears over the fancied neglect, and bemoaning the hard fate which had rendered her fatherless, and deprived her temporarily of a mother's care.

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"But mother will be better soon," urged Coralie, with a sudden flutter at her heart, as she thought of the message contained in the Bible, and wondered if it were true, and her father yet alive.

Susette still pouted, and wiped her eyes, until Aunt Grace, coming in suddenly, found her weeping, and demanded the reason of her tears.

She was too ashamed of her selfishness, however, to own to it, and, as Coralie would not tell on her, Mrs. Richard Blake was forced to be content with guessing at the cause of her grief.

Uncle Joe and Coralie drove first to the War Office, where the big-wig was interviewed again, and told of the message discovered in the Bible.

There was no doubt about the interest he displayed now, and he scanned the page containing the dots with as much eagerness as the other two had done on the previous day. The message began with the first word of the sixth verse, in the eighty-second Psalm, continuing here and there up that column and the next. And when he had copied out each marked letter, and sorted them into words, even the big-wig was convinced "that there was something in it."

"And is that all that you have come to tell me?" he asked, scanning the face of Mr. Joseph Blake with keen curiosity.

"Not quite," returned that gentleman, taking the morning paper from his pocket, and spreading it

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open before the big-wig, whilst he pointed with his finger to the item in the shipping list.

"Ah!"

There was a whole world of meaning in the interjection of the big-wig, and in a moment his finger pounced down beside that of Mr. Joseph Blake.

"Do you see that—Martin & Salter? Why, they are the owners of the *Lucy Jane*, and posed as innocent martyrs in that other affair. Declared they had been swindled by the consignors of the cargo, whom, if you remember, Scotland Yard so signally failed to find. I don't think the detective force will be at fault this time, however," he said, hurriedly, and then his mouth shut with a snap, just like a steel rat-trap when the rat is inside.

Coralie looked alarmed, and, mustering her courage, ventured on a remonstrance. "If you please, sir, may it not be dangerous for father? If—if he is still alive, and all this gets known, they might even kill him!" and she shuddered with fear at the thought.

"It need not be known, saving to the detectives, and they don't chatter," retorted the big-wig, grimly, beginning to turn over papers with nervous eagerness, which observing, Uncle Joe and Coralie took their leave, and departed.

They had little trouble in gaining permission to inspect the *Shooting Star*, as she lay alongside the jetty in the London Dock, and no sea-going craft

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surely ever looked more innocent than the battered, dingy vessel, piled with boxes, bales, and crates of merchandise, and heaps of cordage and cables; leaving barely standing room for the visitors when they stepped across the narrow gangway from the jetty to the vessel.

Captain Bowles, skipper of the *Shooting Star*, was on board, superintending the getting out of the cargo. He was a small man, of fair complexion, and a sinister squint, which gave him the appearance of being able to look three ways at once, a very useful arrangement for keeping his crew in order—since wherever he was he appeared always to have his eye upon them—but decidedly embarrassing to strangers, unused to the peculiarity, as Coralie found to her cost.

"The young lady would like to go below, perhaps; I've a few curiosities in my cabin that may be interesting to her," suggested Captain Bowles, looking at Coralie and her uncle, at the same time squinting furiously in the direction of a knot of sailors gathered by the main hatch.

"Yes, we should like to go below," said Mr. Joseph Blake, whilst Coralie shivered, and turned her gaze away, the sight of Captain Bowles' squint being more than she could endure.

The curiosities were certainly worth looking at, and comprised a wide variety of objects—from one of Buddha's teeth to a handful of ruby dust, which

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is supposed to be a good brain stimulant, and unequalled for sharpening up the intellectual faculties. But all the time they were down in that stuffy little cabin, with its strange odours, Coralie was looking and peeping about, as if expecting to find her father hidden away in some odd corner.

"I suppose you meet some strange experiences in your voyaging, and happen upon some queer people also," said Mr. Joseph Blake presently, as he turned over some tapestry, wondrously embroidered, and smelling of the perfumes of Araby.

"Aye, aye, sir; but the queerest thing I ever had to do with, was that case of a dumb Swede, who sailed with me this last voyage," replied the worthy skipper, clearing his throat, and appearing to be simply bursting with information.

"Indeed! A dumb sailor is rather an anomaly, is it not?" asked Mr. Joseph Blake, but Captain Bowles shook his head with a puzzled air; the word was evidently a stranger to him, and he could not even get withing guessing distance of it.

"This one was a corker, I can tell you," he went on, his momentary bewilderment over, and the desire to describe his marvel springing fiercer than ever in his breast.

"Yes," replied Mr. Joseph Blake, with the gently insinuating air of one who turns a tap to give the water freer vent. But Coralie shivered again, and held her breath in trembling expectancy.

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"It was when we was in the Arabian Sea," commenced Captain Bowles, with the intonation of a man whose yarn is pre-eminently well worth hearing, "We'd run in, storm-driven, to a little bay along the coast, and when the bay abated stayed there to fill our water-casks, there being some good springs thereabouts, and our stock was running low. The men used to put the casks in a boat, and row up the bay to the springs, then fill the casks, and bring them back. One day they came back reporting that the Poll Parrot was missing,—that being the name the dumb man was known by. He'd wandered off—so they said—and hadn't come back. We was short-handed before, but the loss of the Swede, who knew his duty, and did it, would make us shorter still; and I wasn't going to lose him if I could help it, so I just sent them back to look for him again, and I sent them every day for a week."

"And did they find him?" enquired Mr. Joseph Blake, whilst Coralie appeared absorbed in the inspection of some strange looking sandals, which lay among the other curiosities upon the table.

"Yes, they found him, or his shadder, for by that time he wasn't much more,—a regular bag of bones he was, and no mistake. But that was only natural, for it was mostly what you might call desert thereabouts, and he must have been as near starved as no odds. But the strange part was, that the man

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himself was so changed; there, sir, he was regular gone soft in his head, and he didn't know a marling-spike from a belaying-pin. And if we sent him aloft, he could no more climb the rigging than a Dutch doll."

Mr. Joseph Blake stirred restlessly, a possible solution of the mystery was occurring to him, but it was a wildly improbable one, and he was not the sort of man to be led away by conjecture.

"What did you do with the man?" he asked quietly, displaying just the right amount of interest, and no more.

Captain Bowles winked, an operation which rendered his squint more pronounced and hideous than before. "Well, a loss of memory like that smacked of mutiny, don't you see, sir, so we clapped the man in irons for the remainder of the voyage."

"Then he is here in port with you now?" demanded Mr. Joseph Blake, quite unable to suppress the anxiety of his tone, whilst Coralie dropped the sandals with a clatter.

Captain Bowles shook his head. "No, we did not bring him home. He was very ill when we reached Aden, and we left him there."

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CHAPTER XXII.

A SUDDEN JOURNEY.

UNCLE JOE got Coralie away from the *Shooting Star* as quickly as possible after that. He had betrayed his own anxiety, more than was wise or prudent, he knew, but her condition of pitiful distress could not long go unmarked, by even the most unobservant spectator.

"Coralie, what a foolishly emotional young person you must be," he remarked, in a tone of pretended reproach, as they picked their way amongst the piles of merchandise, with which the jetty was crowded.

"Uncle Joe, I've got a feeling that the dumb Swede was my father," she sobbed, clinging to her uncle's arm, the tears coursing like rain down her cheeks, and entirely regardless of the curious looks of the passers-by.

"Hush, hush, child!" he breathed, in a peremptory fashion. "Don't give the situation away in this style. Your father, if still alive, is not yet out of danger. If you betray him, neither you nor I can gauge what the consequences may be."

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She ceased her sobbing then, and struggled bravely for self-control; but he could feel how she trembled as she still clung tightly to his arm.

At the dock gates they entered a cab, and Mr. Joseph Blake directed the man to drive to Scotland Yard.

"I wonder," he said, as he leaned back in the cab, "if we could manage to catch the night boat from Folkestone to Boulogne this evening?"

"We?" she asked, with a start of surprise, whilst a flash of hope came into her face.

"Yes, *we*. You want to go, don't you?" he demanded, with a quizzical smile that was yet full of affection.

"But it will cost a lot of money to go to Aden; won't it Uncle Joe? And we have none, you know," she said, looking up at him, with a pathetic acknowledgment of her indebtedness and dependence.

"Hush, child, hush! What is mine should by rights belong to your father, as you know well. And even were it not so, I should still be bound by the ties of brotherhood, don't you see?"

For answer, she gave his hand a grateful squeeze, and then was silent until they arrived at Scotland Yard.

Mr. Joseph Blake left her in the cab, whilst he transacted the errand which had brought him thither; and when it was done, they turned their faces towards Piccadilly once more.

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"Now, Coralie, what are we to tell them; shall we make a clean breast of it, eh?" he asked, as they made their way westward.

"I told Aunt Grace yesterday. But don't you think we might keep it from Susette just a little longer?" pleaded Coralie, in the elder-sisterly protectiveness that always marked her bearing towards Susette. "She has nothing to apprehend, or to fear, believing father to be dead; but if she knew what we know, the worry of the uncertainty would make her ill."

"As you will, child. And the little one shall be left in peace until we return. But don't protect her over-much, Coralie, or maybe she will get spoiled in the process. There has been very little shielding in your lot lately, and you are none the worse for it either," and again he smiled on her, with the fond affection which already he had begun to display towards his elder niece.

Susette made a great outcry and demonstration upon hearing of the sudden journey planned by Coralie and her uncle. They speedily consoled her, however; and Mrs. Richard Blake, to whom the situation had been explained, helped forward the necessary arrangements with great zest and energy. Perhaps she had confided some portion of the story to her son, for he manifested almost no surprise at this sudden move on the part of his uncle and Coralie, but volunteered to take Susette to the Zoo

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next day, and to give her a good time generally; a proposal which had the effect of quickly drying the young lady's tears, and reconciling her to the impending parting from her sister.

They were able to catch the continental express from Charing Cross, crossing to France by the night service, then speeding southward to Marseilles as fast as steam could hurry them thither. They had been joined at Charing Cross by a detective from Scotland Yard, who was to accompany them on their journey. But though he travelled in the same trains, and voyaged by the same boat, he obtruded himself so little upon them, that uncle and niece were practically alone in their journeying.

But the express trains were all too slow for Coralie, who by this time had worked herself into a perfect fever of unrest and trepidation, which culminated in a fit of severe sea-sickness during the voyage from Marseilles to Port Said.

There was some delay in navigating the canal; and by the time Suez was reached she was able to come on deck, and walk feebly up and down, clinging to the arm of Uncle Joe.

Again there was delay. Something wrong with the engines, necessitating a further stoppage for repairs. No use for Coralie to fret and to fume, and wear herself out with impatience, the great heart of the ocean-leviathan would not commence its throbbing one moment the sooner for all her fretting and

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fuming, and a sort of apathy of helplessness stole over her, as the hours went by, and still the journey was delayed.

But all things come to those who wait, provided they only wait long enough; and in due course the screw recommenced its revolutions, and the good ship steamed ahead again, shaping her course for Aden.

"How shall we know where to look for him when we get there?" was the question that was constantly presenting itself, not to Coralie only, but to her uncle also, whilst the same wonderment might even have crossed the mind of Mr. Prescott, the detective.

If it did, he said nothing about it, however, only day by day grew more reserved and guarded in his replies to the many questions asked him by Mr. Joseph Blake and Coralie.

They left the boat at Aden, and taking up their abode at an hotel, proceeded to await developments, whilst Mr. Prescott disappeared, and was seen no more for a time.

Mr. Joseph Blake called upon the English Resident, hoping through him to be able to trace the dumb sailor, of whom Captain Bowles had spoken so freely.

But that gentleman could give him no assistance. So many sailors, dumb and otherwise, came on shore at Aden that it was next to an impossibility to

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trace a man, the time of whose coming was so little known. Nothing daunted, Mr. Joseph Blake persevered in his enquiries, succeeding so far as to discover that the *Shooting Star* did stop at Aden, discharging part of her crew, and supplying their places with others; but just where that disbanded remnant had gone was the problem that proved so difficult to solve.

Grim forebodings seized him now lest the story told by Captain Bowles had been only partly true, and that the dumb sailor, who might or might not have been his brother John, had been murdered, for some reason best known to the squinting skipper.

With this fear clutching at his heart, he went again to the Resident, doing now what should rightly have been done at the onset, that is—made a clean breast of it, telling the story at length of his brother's supposed death in Rasputya, and the subsequent discoveries which had led to the belief that he might be still alive.

"It is the most wildly improbable tale I have ever listened to, and yet it strangely enough carries conviction with it," remarked the Resident, when he had listened to the end.

"The thing that puzzles me," said Mr. Joseph Blake, "is that, supposing him to be still alive, he should have made no sign. If he had ever lived to set foot on land, the most natural course one might expect him to take would be to make his

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story known to the first Englishman he met. But I can't say this to my niece, and equally I cannot relinquish my search until I have some clue to the ending of it all."

"That man, Captain Bowles, might be arrested, and a little information squeezed out of him," suggested the Resident.

Mr. Joseph Blake shook his head. "The authorities at Scotland Yard think otherwise. We have no proof, you see, that the dumb sailor and my brother were the same; we have no proof either that the dots in the Bible are a real message, and not merely a very marvellous coincidence. And so the detectives think it the wisest plan to keep the worthy captain in strict surveillance, but to allow him his liberty for a time at least."

"Well, yes, not a bad idea; he may commit himself in some unlucky moment, and thus betray what otherwise he would carefully hide," said the Resident, in a musing tone, and then suddenly asked what had become of the detective from Scotland Yard.

"That is the question Coralie and I ask each other at least a dozen times a day," replied Mr. Joseph Blake, with a laugh. "Sometimes I am inclined to wonder whether the fellow has decamped and gone back to London, or——"

But at this moment a servant entering the room handed him a little pencilled note from Coralie,

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urging his immediate return, because "something had happened."

Mr. Joseph Blake rose in all haste, handing the note to that courteous gentleman, the Resident. "You will pardon my hurried withdrawal?" he asked, feeling that matters were coming to a crisis at last.

"My dear sir, don't mention it; and if there is anything that I can do, pray command me," said his host, speeding his going with a flourish.

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CHAPTER XXIII.

FOUND.

THE houses of Aden are open to every wind of heaven, even the inner walls, partitioning room from room, being in many cases made merely of lattice-work, like the divisions in cattle pens.

However desirable this might be with regard to coolness and thorough ventilation, it certainly had its disadvantages when a dust-storm was raging, such as was the case on the morning when Mr. Joseph Blake was so hurriedly summoned from his interview with the Resident.

Gusts of sand, impalpably fine and scorchingly hot, swept into the apartment where Coralie paced to and fro, waiting impatiently for her uncle's return, whilst the howling and shrieking of the storm-wind raised such a commotion of creaking, banging, and shaking of signs, sun-shutters, and badly-hung doors, as to make it a matter of extreme difficulty to carry on any kind of conversation in the tumult.

Notwithstanding these drawbacks to coherency, however, she was rapidly questioning a very dirty

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Arab, who, crouched in a heap on the floor, was airing his limited and very indifferent English in an attempt to answer the many queries with which she plied him.

Then Uncle Joe returned to add his questioning to Coralie's, until the picturesque beggar, growing each moment more bewildered and confused, contradicted himself, stammered in his story, and finally dropped into a dogged and sullen silence, from which none of their efforts were able to recover him.

He had come to the hotel with a message, written upon the back of an old envelope, from Mr. Prescott, the detective, which read, in rather enigmatical fashion, thus:—

"At last I seem on the right track, but am not sure even now. I may be back to-night, or not for days to come. Meanwhile do not leave the hotel, if you can help it."

There was no address, and no date; the message did not even bear Mr. Joseph Blake's name upon it; the only clue to the identity of the sender being the small, square-looking writing of Mr. Prescott, which once seen was not easily forgotten.

"What shall we do?" cried Coralie in great distress, when all their efforts failing, the two stood still, surveying the apathetic Arab, who, clad in his picturesque rags, sat stolid and sullen upon the floor.

"Backsheesh!" ejaculated the beggar, with such

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startling suddenness, that Coralie and her uncle fell back a step, as if preferring to keep a safe distance between themselves and this unknown.

"Of course; I wonder we didn't think of it!" exclaimed Uncle Joe, dropping silver coins in a tempting shower on to the open palms of the expectant beggar.

The Arab talked freely enough after that; but the pity of it was, his statements being made in mongrel Persian, were wholly unintelligible to his anxious listeners. Yet still he talked, and talked, and talked, until they were glad to give him more silver for the sake of getting rid of him.

Then when he had gone, they sat and faced each other in the direst wonder and perplexity now, not knowing whether they had done right in letting the Arab depart, speculating uneasily upon the reticence of Mr. Prescott's message, and only certain and resolved upon one point, namely: on no account to disregard the request of the detective anent remaining in the hotel.

The day passed slowly and anxiously away, whilst the dust-storm raged furiously, and the atmosphere grew more hot and suffocating with every hour that dragged itself away.

The following morning found them restless and unrefreshed, after a night of anxious wakefulness; and the slow hours passed as uneventfully as those of the previous day had done.

Coralie's face was haggard and white with the

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strain, save for two red spots in either cheek; and even Mr. Joseph Blake's countenance had lost its wonted calm serenity. They did not say much to each other, even busying themselves with a pretence of writing letters, in readiness for the English mail next day. A poor pretence surely, since neither of them could manage to write a coherent sentence, because of that terrible tension of waiting.

There was no dust-storm on this day, but brilliant, unclouded sunshine, which, when night fell, dropped with tropical suddenness into a languorous moonless darkness. Neither Coralie nor her uncle felt equal to appearing at *table d'hôte,* but had dinner served quietly in the balcony of their private sitting-room. They had small appetite for food that night, though by way of reassuring each other, they sat trifling with the eatables, although thought and desire were far removed from their own physical needs just then.

Suddenly there came a great noise of some heavy body being dragged or bumped along the corridor outside their rooms, followed by sounds of altercation.

With a half-choked cry, Coralie sprang to fling the door widely open, being quickly followed by Uncle Joe.

A dirty fellow, bowed under the weight of a big roll of matting, was there; whilst one of the hotel servants seemed actively endeavouring to eject him.

"He says it is merchandise which the gentleman

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has purchased; but I tell him to wait until the sir has eaten," explained the servant, whose nationality was as mongrel as his speech.

"I have bought nothing," began Uncle Joe, in a disappointed tone; but Coralie's fingers closed with a sudden grip on his arm—a clutch so hard that it hurt him—whilst she exclaimed, hurriedly,—

"Oh, it is quite right, thank you; will you please to bring the roll in here," drawing back as she spoke, in order that the man with his heavy burden might be able to enter.

Mr. Joseph Blake stared at her in great bewilderment, then he caught a gleam of recognition in that perspiring porter's eye, after which he woke up to the exigencies of the situation, and, stepping forward, shut the door with alert promptitude, right in the face of the wondering servant, whose inquisitive nose had by this time smelled a mystery, and was eager to discover its exact nature.

The door being shut, the man slid his burden gently to the floor, and began to unfasten it with all speed.

"Bring some brandy, quick," he said, with so much energy in his tone, that Coralie flew to obey, but Mr. Joseph Blake bent his energies towards helping to unswathe that bundle.

"And to think that I didn't know you, Prescott!" he ejaculated, staring again at the dirty porter, whose identity with the spruce, trim detective from

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Scotland Yard could only be discovered from his eyes.

"It is not wonderful; I hardly know myself," replied the other, who was breathless still from the weight of his burden, and the hurry of his bringing it.

"Is — is my —" but Coralie, who had come back with the needed stimulant, faltered and broke down over the question she would fain have asked.

"It is your father, I believe," replied the detective, gravely; "but he is very ill. He will not know you, I fear, Miss Blake. Indeed, I fear very greatly that he is past recovering consciousness in this world."

A low cry from Coralie, quickly suppressed; and an incoherent exclamation from Mr. Joseph Blake, as the wrappings all removed, the worn face of a man was revealed, wasted to a skeleton, and wearing the waxen pallor of one who is near to death.

"Wet his lips with the brandy, and touch his tongue, too; but don't put any in his mouth, it would choke him," said the detective.

"A doctor; we must have a doctor," Mr. Joseph Blake said, hurriedly, as he tenderly lifted the head of the sufferer, and slid a pillow under it.

"Yes, I will fetch one just so soon as I can change my clothes; it won't be safe for me to appear in the street in these togs again," remarked Mr. Prescott, giving a hitch to his ragged habiliments as he straightened himself to ease his aching back.

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"There is a doctor here in the hotel—an old gentleman—I heard one of the servants saying so," Coralie said, looking up from her task of painting the sick man's lips with the stimulant.

"Then I will go down and find him," replied Mr. Joseph Blake, hurrying from the room, whilst the detective quickly closed the door after him, and turned the key.

"Why do you do that?" demanded Coralie, in great surprise.

"Because I am afraid," retorted the detective, coming now to kneel beside that wasted form, and loosen the wrappings here and there, where they seemed to press too tightly. "I had to steal him, Miss Blake; and I can't tell how soon he may be missed, or whether the wretches who had him in bondage, tracked me here."

Coralie gave an alarmed glance at the door that was shut, and then at the window, which was open, with the table still spread for dinner upon the balcony.

"But no one would dare to touch him here?" she whispered, anxiously.

"I hope not. But I should have carried him to the Residency, if I had been able to get him so far—as being safer. Ah, here comes the doctor;" and Mr. Prescott sprang up to admit Mr. Joseph Blake and the doctor, who was not so very old after all, though his hair was certainly grey.

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"He has been ill a long time," jerked out the doctor, whose name was Cross, and whose appearance was an able exposition of the same.

"A very long time," replied the detective,—"ague, fever, bad living, and opium."

"Self-administered?" queried Dr. Cross, in the same sharp manner. He was returning to Europe after a lengthy sojourn in the East, and was consequently well versed in the habits and failings of Asiatics.

"I fancy not. Indeed I am sure the stuff was given to keep him quiet," returned the detective.

Dr. Cross gave him a keen glance of enquiry from under his bushy eyebrows, but Mr. Prescott's face was not easy to read, although it was exceedingly dirty. Altogether the situation was puzzling, the medico decided, as he examined his new patient again, more minutely this time, and then proceeded to deliver himself upon the condition of the sufferer.

"He is certainly very low, but I do not think the case is quite a hopeless one; he must be got to bed at once, and a nurse procured, two if possible."

"Couldn't he be taken on ship-board?" asked the detective, anxiously, whilst Coralie and her uncle looked from one to the other in consternation and dismay.

"Move a man in that condition?" exclaimed the doctor, in amazement at what he considered the other's stupidity.

"I had to move him," replied the detective, simply,

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"and I have brought him for a mile or more upon my back, swathed in a roll of matting, but there was no other way."

"I wonder it did not kill him," returned the doctor in a pitying tone, as he bent over the unconscious figure on the floor, and noted that the pulse had already grown stronger.

"But it did not," urged the detective, still persistently, "and he could be carried on ship-board in an hospital ambulance. Money is no object," this last with an appealing look at Mr. Joseph Blake.

"None at all," replied that gentleman, cheerfully, "and really, my dear sir, I think it would be the best thing; you are going on yourself, and could keep an eye upon the case——"

"Oh, yes, let us go, he will be better on ship-board than in this awful place," broke in Coralie, clasping her hands in a panic of apprehension.

At the sound of her voice the sick man's eyelids quivered and moved, as if some remembrance lingered yet, even though he had no strength to express it.

The doctor noticed this, and drew Coralie aside. "Do not speak aloud in his presence, Miss Blake, until he is stronger; your voice disturbs him evidently, recalling perhaps his failing understanding, but for the present it is kinder not to do this even."

Coralie nodded, and was silent. But her heart was full of rebellion nevertheless. Her father

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found—but dying, and she not allowed to give him the comfort of knowing she was by his side; oh, it was monstrous!

A few more persistent arguments from the detective in favour of immediate removal, in which he was ably seconded by Mr. Joseph Blake, and the doctor gave way, yielding a reluctant consent to the sick man being carried on board the *Europa*, which was just then lying at anchor off the town, and timed to start with the morning tide.

But even now, with this concession to his wishes gained, the detective was still manifestly anxious and ill at ease. Not for a moment would he leave the sick man, unless Mr. Joseph Blake and the doctor were both on guard, nor was he willing to allow the door of the apartment to be left open, or even unlocked.

At his request a party of marines were requisitioned to carry the ambulance litter on board the *Europa*, whilst another party, with fixed bayonets, surrounded it for protection, followed by the others of the party, who wondered and were silent.

"I stole him, you see, and every moment I have been dreading a rescue or an assassination," the detective replied, in a cautious tone, to the expostulations of Dr. Cross, at which the worthy medico was silent, if not convinced.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

HOW THE RESCUE WAS EFFECTED.

DESPITE the assertions of Dr. Cross, the sick man seemed none the worse for the journey in the ambulance litter; indeed, when he was laid in a berth in one of the roomy, first-class cabins of the *Europa*, which, by great good fortune, chanced to be vacant, his pulse was found to be steadily gaining in strength.

Not yet, however, would the cautious doctor hold out any hopes of recovery, being unwilling, perhaps, to raise expectations which might never be fulfilled; but the anxious watchers noted how his eagerness grew with every symptom of betterment that showed in his patient, and from that they gathered the encouragement which his tongue withheld.

Not until morning had dawned, and a rapidly increasing stretch of shining lambent water lay between ship and shore, did the wearied Mr. Prescott relax the vigilance of his watch, and take the rest of which he stood so sorely in need.

And all this time Mr. Joseph Blake and Coralie had done his bidding unhesitatingly, wondering

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greatly the while at the urgency in getting away that he had displayed, yet never once venturing to hamper his movements by any doubt or hesitation of their own.

Mr. Joseph Blake had managed to write a hasty note of apology, for the haste and secretiveness of their departure, to that courteous gentleman the Resident, whilst Coralie had seized a bag, and stuffed therein such articles of apparel as she had time for, her chief concern being to keep always by the side of that shrunken, pallid form, which the detective said was her father.

Would she have known him, she wondered. The eyes were so sunken, the face was so drawn by privation and suffering, that there seemed nothing left to recognise, until his eyelids stirred at the sound of her voice. Then, indeed, the momentary quiver of life on the countenance that had looked so strange, enabled her to identify the father she had mourned as dead, in the wan invalid rolled in the bundle of matting.

There was no trained nurse available, so they shared the task between them,—Coralie, Uncle Joe, and the detective,—who proved himself a many-sided individual, since nothing seemed to come amiss to him,—from hunting down a criminal, to making gruel for an invalid.

He was modest, too, disclaiming the praises his grateful clients would have heaped upon him, and

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making out that his achievements had been nothing very great after all.

"You see, I am no stranger to Aden, beastly hole that it is," he remarked with a smile, as he and Mr. Joseph Blake courted the coolness of the evening breeze on a quiet corner of the upper deck, whilst Coralie and Dr. Cross kept watch below by the side of the sick man.

"Yes, so I understood," Mr. Joseph Blake answered, his eyes fixed on a solitary rock peak, that, sharply outlined against the crimson of the evening sky, was the sole evidence of land the horizon afforded.

"I know the people a little, too, and a worse set of vagabonds," went on the detective, "than some of them, it would be hard to find."

"You mean the natives?"

"There are no real natives, at least hardly any; they are a sort of cosmopolitan scum, a residuum of the earth's basest, constantly changing, some from the desert and some from the sea; but the lot among whom your brother fell were a thought worse than those others, because having so much at stake, they had laid their plans with fiendish cunning, and thus out-Heroded Herod."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Joseph Blake, leaning forward with manifest eagerness, "that is just what I want to know,—how it was that he lay sick in Aden without his plight being discovered by any of his countrymen?

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"That was what puzzled me," replied the detective; "and therein I fancy lies a story that we must wait for his recovery to fully understand. But, so far as I can learn, Captain Bowles of the *Shooting Star* believed him to be merely what he appeared—a dumb sailor—absolutely useless as regards seamanship, and so turned him adrift at the first port at which he touched. Why, in that moment of freedom, your brother did not go straight to the authorities with his story, is to me a puzzle that has only one probable solution; he must have made over-much haste in telling his story, and have told it to the wrong person, perhaps one of the very gang concerned in the contraband traffic in arms, in which case, Mr. Blake's plight when I found him was easy to understand. He was in an opium den, being slowly drugged to death."

"But, why—" began Mr. Joseph Blake, in a sort of helpless amaze, stopping short then, because he had not really framed in his own mind the question he desired to ask.

"Why didn't they kill him off sharp and have done with it, do you mean?" asked the detective, grimly.

Mr. Joseph Blake nodded, by way of reply; that was precisely what he did want to know, though it would certainly never have occurred to him to put it in such brutally plain language.

Mr. Prescott smiled, though the effort did not impart a pleasant look to his face, but rather added

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to it a sardonic expression, by no means agreeable to behold. "There are some people whom Satan himself could not kill; an unseen Power guards them. They may suffer, but they cannot die, being held in life for some special purpose. Your brother is one of these, existing in hourly danger of assassination; sick, half-starved, and dosed continually with opium to keep him from chattering, it is a marvel, only just escaping the miraculous, that he did not succumb, and slip quietly out of life."

"How did you discover him?" asked Mr. Joseph Blake, who had been nodding his head vigorously to express his entire concurrence in these sentiments.

"Being in Rome, I was forced to do as Rome does," returned the detective, with a half-laugh of embarrassment; "so I took the round of the drinking-booths and the opium dens. I played pitch-penny with our Jack tars, took the odds on everything bettable with the Belgians, and squatted in the sunshine with the Lascars; picked up a word here, gathered half a hint there, and finally poked my head in at the tea-shop of Lim Fo, which, from its outward appearance, was about the last place in which one would look for the rascality really lurking there. A mild, meek-eyed old party is Lim Fo, a pattern of all the virtues by repute, but underneath his beautiful exterior a collection of every vice under the sun. I got the rare chance of becoming light-porter to his establishment; and I am

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likely to carry the marks of Lim Fo's loving-kindness in scars on my shoulders till I die."

"Do you mean that he beat you?" enquired Mr. Joseph Blake, in an unbelieving tone.

"Just that, sir; wonderfully active with his praying stick was the old Chinaman; and in my assumed character of a Britisher under a cloud, I did not dare appeal to the authorities, don't you see, lest a worse thing befell me; and could only show my teeth in an ugly snarl at the old brute, when he laid on extra hard. But I found what I had come to seek. Upstairs above the tea-shop, in a sweltering hole under the thatch, there were four poor wretches dying by inches—only coming back to consciousness to be dosed into stupidity by their amiable landlord downstairs. Two of them were coloured men, whose money Lim Fo had doubtless appropriated, and was despatching them by degrees; the third was a hang-dog sort of a fellow—vicious, low, and bestial—the kind of man who generally deserves all he gets, and sometimes a little more; but directly I set my eyes on the fourth, I knew I had found the object of my search. It was necessary, however, to make assurance doubly sure, and I waited a day or two until I could light on a moment when my man was sufficiently conscious to answer a question. But he was so weak and ill that I grew desperately afraid lest he should die before a rescue could be effected; so I sent that old rogue, Mir Shan, with

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a note to your hotel, never dreaming you would reward the old wretch so liberally."

"We gave him money to make him talk," said Mr. Joseph Blake, apologetically.

"In which you succeeded," retorted the other, ironically. "He talked so much, and he talked so fast, that his sudden accession to riches through my instrumentality would have been all over the town—the so-called native part of it at least—if I had not managed to give the gentleman a pill in his supper that night, which served to keep him quiet for a time."

"You did not murder him?" queried the listener, in accents of horror.

"Oh no, there was no need, though I guess he felt rather much of an invalid when he came to his senses again," retorted the detective, with a chuckle of amusement at the probable plight of Mir Shan. "But I knew that now there was no time to lose; and I should have made a bolt for it that night, if I could have proved the identity of my man. The next morning, however, I had the rare good fortune to be sent upstairs, just as the effects of the drug were working off a little; and, stooping down over my quarry, I asked if he was John Blake, the missionary from Rasputya. In the weakest of weak voices he told me yes—beginning a hurried appeal to me to save his wife and children—breaking off into some incoherent rub-

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bish about a tune called 'St. Ann,' and then swooning. I didn't waste an unnecessary minute after that, though I had to watch pretty carefully for my opportunity to get my bundle downstairs. In fact, it was evening before I could manage it anyway; and even then, I had to tip Lim Fo into his own tea-chest, and turn the key on him, in order to get the coast clear."

"My dear sir," said Mr. Joseph Blake, in a voice that quavered strangely, "nothing could have been more admirable than the way you have carried through this business of my brother's rescue. You have proved yourself a hero, sir—a veritable hero!"

"No, no; not all that," returned the detective with a laugh of disclaimer. "I only did my duty in return for my wage. The hero lies down yonder, sir, in number seven cabin; the man who gave up his all in the service of his country and his Queen, and with no thought of reward. I am proud to have had a hand in his rescue; and long may he live to enjoy the honour he has gained."

"Amen to that!" cried Mr. Joseph Blake, his voice more shaky than before. "But you are a good fellow, Prescott, a good fellow; and I shall never forget the service you have rendered me and mine."

Night sank swiftly down, brooding over the waste of waters; and not even the pale rim of the new moon could pierce the gloom that overshadowed the world. But the good ship sped onward still, as if in pursuit of the setting sun.

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CHAPTER XXV.

HAVEN AT LAST.

By slow, almost imperceptible degrees, John Blake progressed towards recovery from the long sickness that had lain so heavily upon him; but it was days before Dr. Cross would permit Coralie to speak aloud in his presence—dreading the effect upon him of any recognition in his present state of extreme prostration.

So Coralie's voice was hushed when she entered her father's cabin to take her share of the nursing, and for the time being she was dumb, saving for an occasional harsh croaking whisper of question or instruction to the one retiring or coming on duty.

But as strength returned, it was inevitable that recognition should come, too; and one afternoon when she was alone with the invalid, sitting as still as a mouse because she thought he was asleep, she was startled by hearing him ask in a weak voice: "Coralie, is it yourself; or am I dreaming?"

In a moment she was by his side, holding his feeble, fluttering hands against her wildly beating

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heart, yet keeping her tones steady by a great effort, as she replied,—

"Yes, I am here; and you are not dreaming at all, dear father."

For a moment he lay still, as if gathering strength for fresh effort; then he asked again: "Are we on board ship; I thought I heard the lap of the water outside the port-hole when I woke?"

"Yes," she breathed softly; "we are going home."

"Home?" There was wonder and surprise in his eyes at her answer; for, with the raid on Shankoash, such home as he had been able to make for his wife and children had been swept away; and life since then had held too much of misery for him to think of making another.

It was Coralie's turn to show surprise now; but it was chiefly because she had hitherto so little regarded the fact that they had no home to go to. Uncle Joe had taken care of them, and it had seemed so perfectly natural that he should do so; but now, anxious concern about the future crowded in upon her, and she was frightened lest her father should ask any more questions,—questions that she could not answer.

But he had slipped into quiet slumber, his weak hands clasping hers; and so, for a time at least, the matter might be left in abeyance. Before he awoke, Mr. Prescott came to take her place; and Coralie hurried away, intent on finding some place

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where she could have a good uninterrupted cry, by way of relieving her feelings.

"Coralie! Coralie! where are you going?" the voice was Uncle Joe's; and he hailed her from the top of the companion-way, as she was running past to the shelter of her own berth, where no prying gaze might intrude on her luxury of tears.

At the sound of his voice, she stopped in confusion, not caring to avow her real reason for retirement just then. "I am going to — to brush my hair," she faltered, the tears that lay so close at hand threatening to brim over, and disgrace her openly before the enquiring gaze of her uncle.

"Nonsense; it is not rough. Come up here and see the view; Naples is just coming into sight."

There was no withstanding Uncle Joe when he had made up his mind upon a subject, so the fiction of the hair-brushing, and the fact of the tears, had alike to be relegated to the future, whilst Coralie ran up the companion-way, and joined her uncle on deck.

"Father is conscious; he knew me just now, and asked if we were on board ship, and where bound," she said, as they stood side by side leaning over the rail, and watching the dim outlines of the shore.

"Is that what made you cry?" asked Uncle Joe, with a keen glance into the flushed, perturbed face at his side.

"I have not been crying; I—I was only—" she

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stammered, leaving the sentence unfinished, as her eyes dropped before his steady gaze.

"You were only going to, eh? Well, what was the matter?"

It came out then, the words a little broken by reason of the sobs that could not be altogether repressed. "Father was so surprised when I said we were going home; and then I remembered that we had no home," she said, the last word ending in a gasp and a gurgle, as a sob came up and choked her utterance.

Uncle Joe frowned, and his face, usually so serene and pleasant to look upon, grew overcast, almost fierce, as he replied. "There is no need, Coralie, to be always casting the wrong-doing of my father in my teeth."

"I was not even thinking of it," she retorted, in meek apology.

His brow cleared instantly. "Of course you were not," he answered, patting with loving fingers the hand she had slipped through his arm, "but my plenty, and John's poverty are rather sore subjects with me, my dear, and I am apt to get touchy when they crop up."

"I am so sorry," she murmured penitently, looking up to him for forgiveness.

"There is the dower-house; John could have that if he liked," uncle Joe went on in a musing tone. "Scanes, the agent, was complaining that it would

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be empty again at Lady-day; just come right, won't it, Coralie? But you will have to pay me a visit every day, wet or fine," and he laughed nervously, in order to cover his own emotion and hers, having a truly masculine horror of anything approaching a scene.

The slumber into which John Blake had dropped, after recognising his daughter, proved healing alike to his enfeebled body and shattered nerves, and he awoke from it eager and anxious to ask questions. But it was only by degrees, a little here, and a little there, that Dr. Cross would allow him to be talked to, being fearful of over-taxing the brain already so strained and weakened by the systematic drugging to which it had been subjected.

By equally slow degrees, he was permitted to speak of all that had befallen him, from the time he disappeared from the ridge of Rasputya, until the detective rescued him out of the hands of Lim Fo.

Fragment by fragment the story was told; a history of escape so marvellous, that it was small wonder his hearers deemed him wandering at the first, and judged the recital of facts to be but the ravings of a disordered imagination.

He told them of his voyage down the Rasputya water-way; his finding of the dumb Swede, and the exchange of clothes, which he effected after the man was dead.

At this point of his narrative Coralie gave a great start.

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"Then it was the dumb Swede we buried and sorrowed over, oh, father!" she cried, recalling the anguish of that bitter trial.

"I never knew or dreamed a body would float, or be carried so far; my object was to baffle pursuit, if such should be instituted. But had I once thought of a possibility like that, I would have buried the body in the sand of the spit on which I found him," said Mr. Blake, in a tone of deep distress.

"Never mind, dear father. And after all, it was a comfort to mother and Susette," Coralie hastened to say, in a re-assuring voice, and then dropped to silence again whilst the tale went on.

After putting the body of the Swede into the water, the missionary had sat down to await developments, conning over the lesson spread out before him in the character he was about to personate, imitating such mouthings and gesticulations as his brief intercourse with the dumb Swede had made him acquainted with, until he could execute them with apparent ease and naturalness.

They were moments of palpitating anxiety when the *Shooting Star* appeared again upon the edge of the horizon, but necessity is a hard task-master, and, besides, John Blake had schooled himself well for the part he intended to play. So he ran to and fro on the sandy spit of land by the waterway, flinging aloft appealing hands, and uttering

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the while those queer, inarticulate cries, that had sounded so weird and strange in the man to whom speech was denied.

Complete success attended his ruse; a boat was lowered, he saw two men scramble into it, who, rowing to the place where he was, took him back to the *Shooting Star*, hauling him on board like a bale of unprofitable merchandise.

His supposed affliction stood him in good stead now, since it gave him an opportunity of hearing many things that would have been carefully kept from the knowledge of any man possessed of the power of hearing. But the suffering and the hardship of his lot were greater than his most active imaginings had ever pictured. Hampered by his own ignorance of the duties of a sailor, harassed by his shipmates, goaded forward by the captain, and half-starved as well, John Blake could have prayed for death to set him free, but for the purpose that had sent him forth on his journey, and would not let him rest until it was accomplished.

Then came the death of the bo'sun, Brown, who was buried at sea; and Poll Parrot, whose seamanship had suffered eclipse since his sojourn upon the lonely sand spit, was told off to collect the dead man's effects, and pack them in neat compass for sending home to his friends, should a vessel homeward-bound be spoken. This was John Blake's opportunity, and he seized it promptly—writing his

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message, and pinning it in poor Brown's Bible for safety—and then, because a fragment of time remained to him, and the yearning for home, with the love of wife and children, pulled hard at his heart-strings, he dotted out that strange message, which was eventually to prove the means of his own rescue.

A day or two afterwards the *Lucy Jane* was spoken; and as she was her companion craft, Captain Bowles went on board to have a crack with her captain; and the bundle of effects left by the deceased bo'sun went too, as was natural; while the poor prisoner on board watched its going with enkindled hope, following it with his prayers that the warning so obscurely given might not fail.

Long weeks of hardship followed, until at length, when the *Shooting Star* was herself homeward-bound, he broke down, and lay helpless as a log in his hammock, that was slung in the dark, stiffling hole forward where the common seamen messed.

In vain Captain Bowles raved and cursed over this new development of inefficiency in the supposed Poll Parrot; and in vain did he have him dragged from the hammock and put on his feet, only to collapse in an inert lump on the floor. It soon became patent, even to his hardened understanding, that the man was ill, that he could not work, and that he might even die, if some care was not taken of him.

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The *Shooting Star* was nearing Aden at the time, and so Captain Bowles decided to send him ashore there, in order to get rid of him—depending on the chance of picking up a hand to supply his place—and thankful for the prospect of freeing himself from responsibility, by shifting it on to someone else.

Believing that the hour had come for him to depart this life, and being sorely burdened by the thought of his captive wife and daughters, John Blake committed the serious blunder of blurting out his story to the first Englishman who accosted him after he was put ashore from the *Shooting Star*, forgetting in his weakness that Providence must not be hurried in its development, nor its intentions marred by being forestalled.

The man to whom his story was told was the Aden agent of Martin & Salter; and thus it transpired, that, through his intervention, John Blake was speedily placed under the quieting care of Lim Fo, the Chinaman.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

A NOBLE PURPOSE.

It was only in fragments that this long story could be told; each bit of detail being carefully pieced together by the interested listeners, until it formed a coherent whole. And then the marvel to them was—not that John Blake had come through so many perils unscathed—but that the escape had been accomplished so easily.

But for Mr. Blake's blunder of over-much candour on reaching Aden, he might have come through his trying experience very little the worse for it; as it was, he would suffer to the day of his death from the effects of the slow poisoning of Lim Fo's treatment. That they meant to kill him, there was little doubt; the only wonder was that his enemies had not lighted on a swifter method of effecting their wicked desires.

It was Coralie to whom the sick man told most of the story, as she sat by his side during those days of slow convalescence. His brother seemed half a stranger still, by reason of the long separation that lay between them; and, as yet, this same

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strangeness clogged the freedom of the intercourse between them.

But there was no strangeness or unfamiliarity to disturb his relations with the brave daughter who had kept his secret so well, and borne her difficult part so nobly since first he had committed his trouble to her keeping.

Already John Blake had begun to realise that his work was done; and that whatever of years might remain to him in this life, they must be years of inaction and rest from the labour that he had loved so much.

But he had done his part right manfully and well; and may be, had the old man, his father, still survived, he would have thought twice before branding his second son with the name of coward.

The discovery of the supposed dead man at Aden had been duly telegraphed to the mother of Lieutenant Lisle, by whom it was told as gently as might be to Mrs. Blake, whose mental recovery had progressed by leaps and bounds, since Coralie went off so hurriedly with Uncle Joe.

Joy seldom kills; so, although the shock of knowing her husband was to be given back to her from the dead was very great, Mrs. Blake quickly recovered from it, and awaited, with hardly repressed impatience, the return of the travellers.

Who shall picture the joy of that meeting, or set forth an adequate account of the happiness it

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brought about? Lieutenant Lisle met the voyagers at Southampton, and escorted them to London, where the re-union between husband and wife took place.

For a few weeks the whole party lingered in town. Then, the end of the lieutenant's furlough drawing near, he had to prepare for his return to Mal Mistri.

The day before his departure, he went for a little excursion up the river with Coralie, Susette, and Uncle Joe. But, so far as festivity went, the water party was very much of a failure, everyone being too full of regret over the impending separation to have much thought or attention to spare for the beauty of old Father Thames on that particular occasion.

"Cousin Coralie, don't you consider yourself rather in my debt?" the young man asked, in a laughing tone, as the boat crept Londonwards in the crimson glories of the sunsetting.

"Why?" she enquired, brought out of a profound reverie by his question.

"Do you ask me that?" he went on, still in the same half-bantering tone. "Is it possible that you have already forgotten Mir Aleffo's funeral pyre, and how I helped to rescue you from that very embarrassing situation?"

"My memory would be painfully short if I did," she replied, laughing at first, then quickly becoming grave, for the horror of that time was with her yet.

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Uncle Joe and Susette were away at the other end of the boat, and though there were a number of other people standing and walking near them on the deck, the two who called themselves cousins were practically alone.

"So you are ready to acknowledge your indebtedness. That is a hopeful sign, but I hope you are prepared to go still further, and announce your willingness to make me some kind of recompense for my trouble."

"Why, what can I do?" she queried, laughing now at his persistence, "I have no money with which to pay you for your services, and a debt like that is hardly cleared by money either. But there is one thing I can certainly promise you, if ever you are in any sort of trouble, and I can help you out, I will do my utmost for you, because of what you did for me."

"That is a bargain, then. And mind you, Cousin Coralie, sooner or later I shall expect you to make your promise good."

"Do you expect to get into trouble?" she enquired, in an amused tone.

"I have a sort of prevision, second sight, or whatever it is called, which warns me I shall some day need a favour at your hands, and it's just as well to arrange affairs of this sort beforehand, when you can," he replied, in a mysterious manner, which puzzled her not a little, though he obstinately

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refused to enlighten her any further on the subject.

Uncle Joe and Susette came back then, and they naturally enough began talking of Mal Mistri, and the lonely life at that isolated fort.

"It's a beastly slow place. If only there was more stirring it wouldn't be so bad,—a little fighting, a few folks killed, or something of that sort," said Lieutenant Lisle, chiefly with a view to shocking Susette, in which he was particularly successful.

"Oh, Cuthbert, how can you speak of such dreadful things? Just hear him, Uncle Joe," cried the little girl, with a horrified look on her face, as she turned to Mr. Blake.

"I hear him, Susette, and I shouldn't be surprised if he finds the dead level of life at Mal Mistri rather waked up when he gets back there again," rejoined that gentleman, slowly.

"How do you mean, sir?" asked the lieutenant, in surprise.

"There's a rumour in the papers this morning that the frontier tribes are getting restless, that, having got possession of rifles and ammunition, they are now seeking a pretext to use them. Of course it may be only a rumour, and with little or no foundation in fact," added Mr. Blake, hastily, noticing the dawning terror in the eyes of his youngest niece.

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"As likely as not it's true. I'm glad I'm going back to-morrow, anyhow, for it would be a miserable sell if I was to miss any fun there might be after all the weeks and months I've languished there, with nothing to do, and all that time to do it in," said the young man, energetically, brightening up straightaway, and talking enthusiastically for the remainder of the way home on the hazards and excitements of border warfare.

Next day he departed in high spirits, for the first edition of the morning papers contained tidings of a lonely fort on the Sindh border having been surprised and destroyed by a tribe armed with rifles of the very newest make and pattern, the garrison being compelled to seek safety in flight, although by so doing they allowed a large supply of stores and ammunition to fall into the hands of the invaders.

Mrs. Richard Blake carried a sad face and a heavy heart for many days after she had bidden farewell to her soldier son. But separations and dangers are the common lot, and she strove, with all the force of a strong, resigned nature, to accept the inevitable, and to accept it cheerfully.

Soon after the going of the lieutenant, the others took flight for Tupton Magna. It was many years since John Blake had seen his native place, and a great wave of emotion swept over him as he recalled the sad past, and the breach between his

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father and himself, which this world would never see healed.

His return was met by an ovation of welcome from the villagers, most of whom knew him only by name, though some there were who remembered the tall, fine-looking, young clergyman. But these gazed in amazement at the bowed, feeble figure of the man so early old, who leaned for support on the arm of his eldest daughter, and shed tears of emotion at the sight of his childhood's home.

But they cheered him with lusty, hearty British cheers, for he was a hero, a man who had risked his life in the service of his Queen, and who had put his country's good even before those closer ties of wife and children.

Uncle Joe had placed the old dower house, standing on the edge of the park, at his brother's disposal; at the same time settling on him such an income as would maintain him and his family in comfort.

There was a record congregation at Tupton Magna church on the following Sunday, when a public thanksgiving service was held, to celebrate the missionary's return.

They sang the metrical version of the ninetieth Psalm:

"O, God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come."

And while the pealing notes of the organ filled in and enriched the chorus of human voices, as

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the great congregation poured forth their hearts in song, Coralie's thoughts went back to far Rasputya. Over again in memory, she was living again the terrible scenes that followed the Rao's death, and her own miraculous escape from destruction.

She had been saved from a cruel death,—for what? To live at ease on her uncle's bounty, with every whim and fancy indulged, and no reasonable desire ungratified? It was a pleasing prospect, and yet her thoughts were still away among those people who sat in darkness, with no gleam of Gospel light to illumine their lives.

Amrita had been good to her, and Amrita was a heathen still. At the thought, Coralie's heart bounded with a sudden great decision, there should be no life of luxurious ease for her; but, when she was old enough, and her education was finished, she would go back to Rasputya to teach the Ranee and her followers the glorious truths of the Christian religion.

Meanwhile, the voices of the singers had dropped to a softer tone, and only a few flute-like notes from the organ, merged and mingled with the human melody:

"Time, like an ever rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away."

Then she lifted her face with a glowing smile, for she had offered herself in sacrifice for mission work, and God would accept the service.

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"What made you so happy in church, this morning, Coralie, your face was quite transfigured; were you thinking of all that Psalm meant to us?" asked her father, later on in the day, when he was resting on a couch, with his eldest daughter close by.

"Partly; and, father dear, I was making up my mind, too, that as soon as I was old enough, I would go back to the Ridge of Rasputya, if you would let me, and teach Amrita and her fighting men more about the truths of religion," she said, but a little shyly, for it was not easy for her to speak of a matter so close to her heart.

"God help you, my child, to live up to the resolution you have taken, and may your stronger hands carry on the work my weaker ones have dropped," he answered, slowly, and in a tone of deep feeling. Then silence dropped between them for a time, whilst his thoughts crept back towards the past, and hers bounded forward to the future.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

PREPARING FOR THE WORST.

THERE was considerable activity in the mud-walled fort at Mal Mistri; a constant coming and going of men and camels, men and asses, and men mounted on horseback, though these last were fewer in number than the others.

The rumours of evil were fast developing into well substantiated facts. Indeed, there was every appearance of a serious rising among the frontier tribes and robber hordes, which, like the raiders of Rasputya, lived mainly by thieving and depredations.

On this occasion, however, there was no mention of the dwellers on the Ridge as being concerned in the trouble, though it was only too probable that they would join forces with the disaffected warriors of the frontier.

Having his eyes well open to contingencies, Major Sutcliffe had telegraphed to Kurrachee for reinforcements, but before these could possibly arrive, parties of men had been dropping in from other directions, asking that they might be allowed to

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remain for a little time in the protecting shelter of the fort. Each of these had a different story to tell, but though unlike in detail, every recital had the same trend; and Major Sutcliffe, more alarmed than he cared to admit, telegraphed again, only to find that the wires had been cut, somewhere along the line of route between Kurrachee and Mal Mistri.

Dismay seized on him then. But there was no course open to him, saving to patiently await the coming of the hoped-for relief. One thing was positive, in any case he must not send any of his little force out to locate the damage done to the telegraph wires, since he could not trust the strangers just then within his gates.

In his dilemma he summoned Corporal Bell to a conference, on the best means of holding out in case of an attack, which might be hourly expected; and which was not in any case likely to be long delayed.

"Well, sir, since you ask me, I should say the first thing to be done is to clear the place, bag and baggage of the coloured truck we're lumbered up with," said the corporal, with an air of decision.

"But I cannot turn them out after promising to take them in," objected the major, almost petulantly.

"Then, of course, sir, you'll have to make the best of it; only, myself, I don't like the looks of some of 'em, nor their talk neither," rejoined Bell, stolidly.

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"What do you mean; have you heard something that I have not?" demanded the major, quickly.

"I can't say what you've heard, and what you've not, sir, but there's a sort o' family likeness in their stories, as makes you feel that everyone of them is first cousin, or half-brother to the other; and, in my opinion, the whole job is a put up business," said the corporal, sententiously.

"But, why put up; what object could these men possibly have in fleeing from their homes to take refuge at a border fort, unless some great danger was pressing?" the major's voice had an impatient ring, for the corporal was, even for him, unusually slow in making his meaning plain.

"We've stores and a fair stock of ammunition; as likely as not they think it is three times as much as it really is. But anyhow it would be a prize worth getting hold of, so they come along with the story of this garrison as showed a clean pair of heels, and of that handful of men as tried to hold out, and couldn't, until it's my belief there isn't a word of truth in the whole lot of it."

"But the telegraph lines have been cut," the major objected, unbelieving still.

"Maybe, or maybe they've only broken down natural like; you never can tell with isolated wires like these. Don't you remember, sir, that time when we was stationed in that forest district in Bengal, how the wires was always getting out of

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order at certain times in the day, and we couldn't make it out nohows, until a watch was set, and then we found it was a colony o' black-faced monkeys as used to get on the wires, to swing there a few hundreds at the time?"

"I wish I could be sure that this breakdown was due to nothing worse than black-faced monkeys," sighed the major; then he went on, in a more energetic tone, "If only reinforcements arrive in time to help us, I'll send a relief party across the desert to Ahl Jaffer, to see what has become of the garrison there; the monsoon hasn't set in heavily enough to stop them yet, I should think, not if they keep to the high ground all the way."

"Meantime I should request them gentry below to camp outside for a few days, begging your pardon for interfering," said Bell, who felt that half the danger would be averted were only that motely crew safely beyond the gate of the fort.

"I can't turn out defenceless men to be butchered in cold blood; I told you so before," rejoined the officer, testily. So the corporal saluted, and withdrew without another word, but it is only fair to say that his opinion on the subject was not one whit altered.

It was nearly sundown that same day when a party of horsemen were seen approaching the fort from the direction of Kurrachee. At first the

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major deemed these to be the hoped-for reinforcements, but a moment's reflection showed this to be impossible, as it was not yet thirty-six hours since he had telegraphed for aid, and the journey was never accomplished in less than forty-eight hours, often taking even longer, when, as now, the monsoon had set in.

The approaching horsemen might prove to be the first instalment of the attacking party, only, as a rule, these robber hordes preferred to fight by day. It was all in vain that he levelled his strongest field-glasses in the direction of these unknowns; rain was falling heavily, whilst a steamy mist from the hot earth blurred his vision, and gave a fanciful, distorted appearance to all objects not close at hand.

Then came a cheery shout through the mist, an unmistakably British shout, too, given with all the strength of youthful lungs, and Corporal Bell, who stood just behind his commanding officer, recognised it instantly.

"It's the lieutenant, sir, I'd know his voice anywhere, and he's back a week before his leave expires, too," and the old soldier's feet moved impatiently as if, but for his superior's presence, he would have executed a festive skip in token of his delight.

"Cuthbert Lisle? surely not!" exclaimed the major, but there was hope in his tone as, the shout being

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repeated, he turned to hurry down, in order to welcome his subordinate at the gate of the fort.

And Lieutenant Lisle it proved to be, accompanied by three Sikhs, mounted on desert ponies, all very damp, and very warm, but safe and sound, and not very much the worse for the journey through the pouring rain.

"Oh, I say, what's up? Are you having a reception, sir, or are these merely casual visitors?" asked the young man in amazement, seeing the groups of swarthy natives, wandering Arabs, and the sulky desert traders, who professedly were such loyal British subjects.

"Well, not exactly; in point of fact it's more like an 'At Home,' with this difference, that the guests are all self-invited," rejoined the major, adding in a different tone, "they have fled here for protection, the tribes are in a most unsettled condition, and no one's life or property is safe. The little garrison at Ahl Jaffer is hard pressed, they say, but I haven't had a man to spare for their assistance until reinforcements come, and now something has happened to the telegraph, and I can't get a message over the wires."

"I know where the breakdown is!" exclaimed the young man, excitedly, "one of my fellows pointed it out, but I didn't think it amounted to a stoppage then. You remember that dip in the track, sir, some sixteen or seventeen miles back,

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where the mound is that has three thorn bushes growing on the top?"

"I know it," assented the major, quickly.

"One of the poles on the Kurrachee side of the mound has sunk in the sand so low, that the wires must drag across the top of the mound; either a higher pole should be put up, or the wires carried a little to one side of the hill."

"That is good hearing. I had been fearing the wires had been cut,—always an ominous sign in times like these," returned the officer, with a profound sigh of relief, and then briskly changing the subject, he demanded news of the outside world, that world which seemed so far away from the desert reaches around Mal Mistri.

"There's plenty stirring of one sort and another, and I shouldn't be surprised if a little of the commotion travels as far as here," replied the young man, plunging into a whirlpool of newsy talk, which skipped from London to Aden, and shuttlecocked to and fro between Bombay and the Mediterranean, gave a fragmentary light on the wonderful rescue of John Blake, then danced away to the reputed risings along the frontier, and so on till he was out of breath.

There was too much of it to be all taken in and digested at once, but that did not matter, and there would probably be ample time for repetition of the details, before any fresh tidings arrived to

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make this stale by contrast. Just at present there were other things to think of, the first and most important being the relief of the garrison of Ahl Jaffer, which fort was a three days' journey further into the wilderness.

In years when the monsoon was heavy, Ahl Jaffer was wont to be cut off alike from friend and foe for four clear months. But this season the rains so far had been very light and variable, hardly amounting to what was called a wet season in those parts, and the desert water-courses had not begun to overflow and spread to meet the incoming sea.

Daily, however, the prospect of reaching the isolated garrison became more remote, and if help was to be sent to them, it must be sent at once.

"I tell you what I will do!" exclaimed the major, after a long and serious discussion of pros and cons, "I will send you, Bell, and half-a-dozen Sikhs, the same fellows who went with you to rescue Mrs. Blake and her daughters, and may you be as successful this time as you were then."

"We will do our best, sir," replied Lieutenant Lisle, modestly enough, but his eyes were dancing with glee at the prospect of adventure, and the danger that might have to be met and overcome, between Mal Mistri and the fort that was in peril.

"That is every soldier's duty," remarked the major, sententiously, and then he commenced to talk of

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the broken telegraph, and the work necessary to put it into repair again.

"When are we to start, sir?" asked the young man, recalling the attention of his superior to the subject most closely affecting himself.

"At daybreak. No time must be lost if you are to reach the place at all. In the event of your being too late to get through before the water rises, and yet find when you turn back that your retreat is cut off, you had better make for the nearest tribe that is friendly, and get them to bring you here in boats; for, as things are, I can't afford to be without you here during flood time this year."

"We shall have to leave the animals behind if we come back in boats," objected the lieutenant.

"Yes; it is unfortunate, I know, but there is no help for it. Now the sooner you turn in, the fresher you will be for the start, and you will need all the strength you can muster for the work you have before you."

The relief party started the next morning, just as the first gleam of rose-colour from the east lifted the dark curtains of night. The atmosphere was hot and oppressive, no breath of air or freshness of early morning anywhere, and the camels and asses, on which the small company were to make the journey, hung their heads with a dejected air, as though weary at the start.

There was no depression visible, however, on the

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faces of the two white men who rode out of the gate between the high mud-walls of the fort. And even the half-dozen Sikhs, who usually carried solemn, impassive countenances, looked as alert and eager as their lighter brethren.

Strangely weird was the desert this morning. From every pool and stretch of water a thick vapour like steam was rising, whilst a billowy white fog hid the sky and the sun, yet all the while reflecting the heat like a looking-glass.

Their way lay along a ridge of hard, dry sand, which stretched for many miles due north from Mal Mistri, a dreary road enough in clear weather, but awesome and dreadful through the thick mist, which shut them in like a wall on either hand.

The whole day they pressed forward, with only one short halt at noon, but never a living creature crossed their track, nor did the sound of man or beast come to them out of the white gloom.

"We shall have to camp soon," remarked Lieutenant Lisle, with a glance at that part of the fog wall where the west and the setting sun might be supposed to be.

"Yes, sir, and there should be some sand boulders about here somewhere, leastways there was the last time I travelled this track, and we can't have missed 'em, seeing it's straight on, with water both sides," replied Corporal Bell, who was peering through the mist in the effort to see.

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"There's something in front, but whether boulders or bushes I can't tell," said the lieutenant, and then the animals pushed forward at a quicker pace, as if realising that rest and food were close at hand.

Camping was a simple matter, since their food was ready cooked, and they had no fuel to make a fire. There was no tent to pitch either, but they would sleep wrapped up in a waterproof sheet, each man with his back propped against a boulder—not a very comfortable or luxurious couch, but the best that could be procured under the circumstances.

Bundles of fodder had been brought for the asses, whilst the camels had nawaleh cakes, which were made of barley flour, kneaded into lumps with ghee and water,—these were thrust down the animals' necks by a dexterous movement, after which the camels digested them at leisure.

By noon next day the ridge of sand was left behind, and in its place came bristling rocks and miles of morass, through which the camels splashed with as much indifference as if it had been merely desert sand, but the asses were more cautious, and picked their way carefully, choosing the driest places, just as a cat does when taking a stroll on a showery day.

It was a weary journey, but no one dreamed of complaining, only, as they drew near the end of it, each man looked at his neighbour with a silent,

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unspoken wonder in his heart as to what would be the condition of things when Ahl Jaffer loomed in sight.

To-day a strong wind was blowing, bringing gusts of rain; the ground was broken and rocky still, but at length the little border fort came into view, perched on a small eminence, with tamarisk and mimosa bushes growing about the walls.

"Bell, the flag is down!" exclaimed the lieutenant, who had been examining the fort through his glass.

"You don't say so, sir?" and the worthy corporal's voice was full of consternation and dismay, as he strained his eyes to discover if the other had made a mistake.

"I can't see it, at any rate; and the gate is open. I say, let's hurry," and the young officer endeavoured to urge his camel forward at a greater speed.

"For my part, I should be inclined to lie low, and peep round a bit, for in times like these you can't reckon to a certainty on the welcome you'll get when the flag ain't flying," rejoined Bell, cautiously.

"We must risk the welcome, I'm afraid, and press forward as fast as we can push our cattle on. I believe the place is deserted, by the look of it; and if it hasn't been looted, it will be our duty to

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hold it until help arrives," shouted the lieutenant, as his camel shot forward at a lurching, lolloping gallop, unpleasant to behold, but more painful by far to experience.

"Right you are, sir; and there's no danger of our dying of dissipation out here, anyhow; it's a nice quiet spot, with plenty of time for thinking," rejoined the corporal, who did occasionally become sarcastic in his utterances.

The lieutenant smothered a groan, for he too was thinking of the four months of solitude, and perhaps short commons, if the fort was to be held, and the flag of empire kept floating upon it.

It was anxious work climbing the hilly track to the gate; for aught they knew they might be riding straight into ambush, and at any moment a raking fire might be opened upon them from an unseen foe.

Nothing so disastrous happened, however, only the desert wind howled about their ears, and a driving rain wet them through and through, as the camels lurched and rolled over the uneven ground, and the asses trotted nimbly after.

The monsoon was commencing in good earnest after all; a day or two of rain like this, and the road by which they had travelled would be impassable.

Into the courtyard, or enclosure within the walls, lumbered the camels, coming to a standstill so sud-

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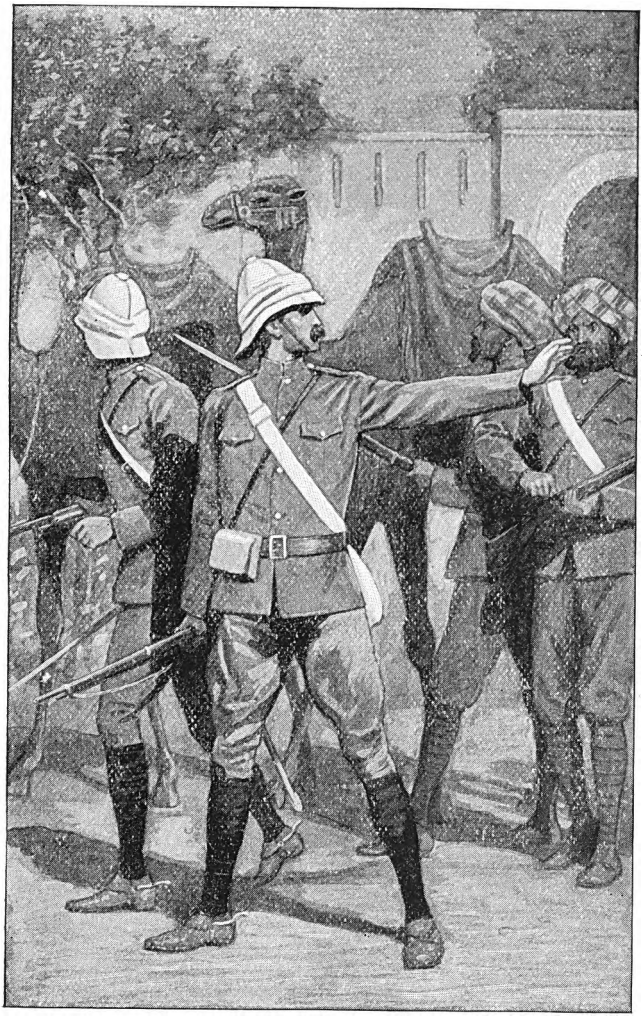

"Lively there, my boys; keep your rifles handy," he cried.—*p.* 261.

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denly that it was only wonderful the riders were not flung from their seats.

"Deserted, I declare," exclaimed the lieutenant in a disgusted tone, as he looked round him. "I can understand a man dying at his post, borne down by overwhelming odds, but running away is in a soldier the blackest of all crimes!"

"I'd suspend the verdict, pending inquiries, if I was you, sir," replied the corporal, with a judicial air. "We may find bodies yet in some of these holes and corners, which will knock the running-away theory on the head. Ah! I thought I heard something then; lively there, my boys, keep your rifles handy," he cried sharply, and in a moment the six coloured men were standing back to back, prepared to shoot in any direction where danger first appeared.

The two white men began an examination, cursory at first, then more thorough, for sounds there certainly were,—smothered cries as from people in extremity,—though as yet no trace could they find of the place where these were hidden.

"It's like a game o' hide and seek, only it's uncommon hard to find them as is hidden," remarked the corporal, when, after a strict and careful search, no trace of the authors of the appeals for aid could be found. The Sikhs were shivering and shaking in their shoes, firmly believing that a troop of evil spirits had taken possession

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of the place, and were prepared to hold it against all comers. Even the asses showed signs of uneasiness, but the camels, unimpressionable beasts that they were, had crowded together under an open shed, and were calmly discussing some fodder they had found there.

Lieutenant Lisle paused a moment, standing in deep thought, whilst a fresh outbreak of shrieks and cries sounded as if from the ground at their feet.

"The poor wretches are underground somewhere, that's plain enough, but where is another matter; we've looked in the well, and certainly they are not there," he said, gazing round with a sorely puzzled air.

"I know; I've got it!" exclaimed the corporal, with an excited prance, which led him right into the middle of a mud-puddle. "There's an underground magazine at this place I've heard, though where it is, and how it's got at, is quite another matter," and he rushed about in the endeavour to find an entrance, whilst Lieutenant Lisle followed him, with a curious set look on his face, and a very clearly defined fear at his heart.

They found the stair at last, a kind of well with the end of a ladder sticking out of it, the opening having been hidden, as if with a purpose, by a lot of dried mimosa boughs being flung above it.

With a chuckling cry of triumph, the corporal

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was about to scramble down the ladder with all speed, but the other stopped him. "No, Bell, I'm in command, so I go first; you can stand at the top, and keep the ladder steady."

The corporal looked as if he would like to remonstrate, but discipline was almost second nature to him, so he stood back to let the lieutenant go first, only muttering something, half-articulate, about the rashness of young blood.

Down the shaky ladder, into the black mouth of the well, plunged Lieutenant Lisle, his face white and set, but his resolution never for a single moment failing him.

The ladder was not very long, and at the bottom he found himself standing on the ground confronted by a low-browed door! This was fast locked, and, kicking it vigorously, he shouted, "Anyone inside there?"

A chorus of groans and cries burst out, muffled and half-incoherent, but so close at hand that he had no difficulty in understanding how dire was the need within.

"Help, help! Make haste, or you'll be killed, as well as we! Get a hatchet and batter down the door! Hurry, hurry, or it will be too late!"

"Bell, a hatchet, two hatchets, a saw, a hammer, anything to beat in the door; our lives depend on your making haste," shouted the young man, beginning to shake and pound the woodwork, as if

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he would knock it down with sheer strength of fist.

But that low-browed portal had been built for strength and endurance, and it yielded not the eighth of an inch, for all his shaking and pounding. Bell returned a minute later with a sledge hammer in one hand, a murderous-looking hatchet in the other, and, excited though he was, he had noticed as he came that the hatchet was stained with blood.

Down the ladder he slid, weapons and all, and, standing beside the lieutenant, began to rain a shower of deafening blows on the door, whilst the young officer plied the hatchet with equal vigour.

Crack, snap, crash! The woodwork was through, and the intrepid two were quickly through also, and not a moment too soon either.

They found themselves in a low-roofed chamber, lighted dimly from the roof. Three men lay on the floor, each strongly fettered and bound to the wall. In the centre of the room, or cavern, was a tub half-full of gunpowder, and burning steadily towards it a carefully set and regulated fuse.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

MOTLEY TO THE RESCUE.

WITH a quick movement Lieutenant Lisle sprang forward and began stamping out the fuse, whilst Corporal Bell, whose intelligence had not so clearly grasped the situation, stood still, staring in bewildered fashion at the scene before him.

The three men had been gagged, but imperfectly, and had, by extraordinary efforts, bitten the gags sufficiently to enable them to shout, though the most strenuous endeavours failed to set free their tightly-bound limbs.

"It's as well we didn't dawdle in our search to find where the cries came from," said Corporal Bell, panting a little, as he lifted the lid from the barrel of powder, and took a look inside.

"Just as well; it is always best to make haste over a job of this kind," the lieutenant said, calmly, as he stooped to free the man who lay nearest to him.

"You are a cool pair, anyhow. Where do you come from, and how did you know we were in trouble?" asked the man who was liberated first,

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as he sat up and commenced to rub his legs, in the hope of restoring circulation in them.

"From Mal Mistri; and rumour for once appears to have spoken truth," said Lieutenant Lisle, as he busied himself over the second man, whilst Bell worked away at the third, who was more tightly tied than his companions, and when set free from his bonds was so numbed as to be quite helpless for a time.

"There's mostly some truth in rumour at the bottom, and we've been having a tight time of it here lately. If we'd only had a telegraph like Mal Mistri, we might have got help through soon enough to save the stores and ammunition," the man who had spoken before remarked, in a dissatisfied tone.

"Where are the others,—the rest of the garrison, I mean?" asked Corporal Bell, bethinking him of the bloodstains on the hatchet.

"Dead, and gone, every one of them, excepting the Judas-wretch that sold us for gold!" retorted the man, bitterly, whilst the poor fellow whose bonds had been so cruelly tight, caught his breath in a whimpering sob, at the remembrance of all the suffering he had gone through.

"How was it you didn't share their fate?" asked Lieutenant Lisle.

"We should have done, if you hadn't happened along when you did," the man growled, dourly.

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The young officer started, the words recalled his own utterance on the ridge of Rasputya, and Coralie's tacit rebuke.

"Things like that don't just 'happen;' Divine Providence rules our lives," he said, gravely, then admitted to himself privately, that it was harder to be a witness-bearer of God's truth, than to face death in the discharge of his soldierly duty.

The man laughed in a scornful, sneering fashion, that was peculiarly irritating to listen to.

"Look here, it doesn't become you, Tom Smith, or whatever your name is, to go making a mock o' religion, when you've just been saved from being blown to smithereens," put in Bell, savagely, coming close up to the man, and glaring down, as if he would enjoy shaking him.

"My name is Job Warren, and I'm a sergeant-major of the Fifth," growled the man, in no pleased tone.

"I shouldn't have thought it. I shouldn't have taken you for anything but a private myself," retorted Bell, with withering emphasis, then he went on,—"Perhaps, now you're doing the introductions, you'll tell us who your mates are, and then we'll be strolling upstairs again, for them Sikhs that came with us thought the place was full of evil spirits, when they heard you shouting down here."

"And they weren't far out, either," said the man who had not previously spoken, "for we ain't what you may call saints, anyway."

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Job Warren laughed again, only now there was more bitterness than scorn in the sound. Then he bethought himself of Bell's injunction to introduce his comrades, "He's Tom Jefferson," pointing to the man who had last spoken, "and t'other is Lance Bullen, both privates; Captain Byng who was in command, is dead, had his head split open with a hatchet, and of our black fellows, some are dead, and some ran, the cowards that they were!"

"How did it all come about?" asked Lieutenant Lisle, who was on his knees by the man, called Lance Bullen, helping to rub the poor fellow's limbs into some semblance of life again.

"We'd been pestered for weeks with the petty tribes on the wooded ridges, sending to demand this thing and that. Then finally they came, and ordered us to give up all our ammunition and rifles, telling us that all the forts on the Sindh border had been taken and destroyed; but that if we were prepared to yield the place peaceably, our lives would be spared. Our captain told 'em that he only took orders from his own government, and if they wanted our ammunition they'd have to fight for it. Then we tried to get a message through to headquarters, but failed, afterwards sending messengers to Mal Mistri, asking for help, but these fell into the hands of the enemy and had but short shrift. We didn't make any more attempts to get messages through, but just settled

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down to hold out as long as we could, and then to die fighting, if no help came. But we hadn't taken treachery into account, and one of our garrison made terms for himself with the outsiders, then let them in upon us, when we least expected their coming."

"What did you do, then?" burst in Bell, excitedly.

"There wasn't much we could do," replied Warren, with a weary air, "for they came in with a rush, about twenty to one, and there wasn't elbow room for fighting. The captain fought desperately for three minutes, and then was struck down from behind; after that, it didn't seem to matter much what did happen, so we flung down our arms, and yielded ourselves prisoners."

"I'd sooner have died like your captain; but we ain't all made alike," commented Bell, with an air of tolerance.

"Then they promised us our lives if we'd show them where the ammunition was stored; and as a man's life is mostly worth him more in comparison than a few cases of rifles and kegs of powder, why, we showed 'em downstairs politely enough, opened the door, and invited 'em to help themselves, just as hospitably as you please," continued Warren, paying no heed to Bell's interruption.

"What then?" demanded Lieutenant Lisle, sternly. He had been listening with set face and tightly compressed lips, and it seemed to him that these

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men had yielded all too easily, even preferring life to honour, in the manner in which they had flung down their arms.

"Then they went into an awful rage because the stores were not larger, refusing to believe that this was the whole of our stock of ammunition that was stored here, and bidding us show them where the rest was kept. They wouldn't believe us when we declared that was all, and after threatening us with everything bad that they could think of, strung us up here, then lighted the fuse, and left us to die at our leisure."

"I wonder we didn't see something of them as we came; it couldn't have been more than two hours since that fuse was lighted," remarked the lieutenant, stooping to examine the pipe which led to the powder-barrel, and which he had only partly destroyed.

"Nearer three, I should say, sir; though time does go slow when you're strung up waiting to die. But they are a special slow sort of fuse that we've had to use here in blasting the rock, and it wasn't lighted properly either," Warren answered.

The officer made no further remark at the time, but helped the liberated men to climb the ladder to the outer air, where the Sikhs still waited in fear and trembling, they having by no means relinquished the theory that the fort was haunted by very evil spirits indeed.

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A search was at once instituted for the body of Captain Byng, which was presently found, half a mile from the fort, stripped and mutilated, then left for the jackals to feast upon.

They buried the unfortunate soldier with every military honour they had at command, Lieutenant Lisle reading the burial service in his clear tenor voice, yet wondering, as he read, who would be found to perform the same solemn rite for himself and his comrades if the enemy came back again.

When the funeral was over, the next thing to be thought of was their own safety, and how they might still hope to hold the fort for the Queen.

Ordering the gates to be closed, and a sentry posted, Lieutenant Lisle next had a flag run up, and then proceeded to inspect what stores of provisions remained after the raid of the robber tribes.

"Everything is clean swept away, sir, except two bags of rice and a box of candles that the beggars overlooked by some lucky accident," said Bell, ruefully, coming back from a foraging expedition round the storeroom.

"Then we must live on boiled rice, with a candle once in a while as a relish, if nothing better is to be had," replied the officer, with a grim humour that had underlying it a vast amount of stern resolution.

Bell shook his head a little doubtfully, as if the

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proposed diet failed to commend itself to him, and then the two men who had travelled so far, and found such a scanty welcome at the end of their journey, turned them about to make the best of things, if, indeed, a best there could be found to a prospect as dreary as this.

The wind had freshened to a gale, and it was raining hard. But the animals were all under cover, with fodder enough for the night, and the men from Mal Mistri, with the three who had been rescued from death, prepared to fare sumptuously on boiled rice, and such provisions as the travellers had not consumed on the journey.

"If it keeps raining like this, the place will be cut off in another twenty-four hours," Warren said, anxiously, as he gazed out over the wet landscape from the narrow loophole of a window above the gate.

"Have you a boat?" asked Lieutenant Lisle.

"No. There used to be a canoe or two, but they became too old for use, and were never replaced. The nearest ridge is two days' journey away, and so there has been no use for a boat; we preferred to stay at home as a rule when the wet season set in," Warren answered.

"Which is the nearest ridge to you from here?' the lieutenant asked. He was making calculations with a pencil and a piece of paper, as to how long their store of rice might last among the

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garrison of eleven souls, and privately wondering if it might not be prudent to kill the fattest of the camels to-morrow, in order that its flesh might be used to eke out the rice rations.

"The nearest populated ground, sir, is the ridge of Rasputya, but its Rao was one of the most determined raiders of the whole Rann, and by no means a comfortable next-door-neighbour. However, he died, or was killed, about a year ago,—perhaps not quite so long, but getting on that way,—and now there's a Ranee in power who may be a little more peaceably inclined, but I'm not sure."

"This Ranee is daughter of the late Mir Aleffo, is she not?" asked the young officer, remembering Amrita with a start, and wondering he had not thought of her before.

"Yes, Mir Aleffo was to have led the federated tribes of the frontier in a great revolt, only luckily he died just in the nick of time. Since then the tribes have revolted and fought, just when and how it has seemed best to them; there's no concerted plan or scheme, they just swoop down on the nearest fort, and clear it out as they did this place."

"Is there any possible means of getting a message to Rasputya?" asked the lieutenant, seeing a way of escape for himself and his comrades, if only this could be accomplished.

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But Warren shook his head. "Even if we'd got a boat, I don't see how it could be done; and besides, sir, when the waters are up, the chances are that the raiders will come back in boats of their own, to see if there's anything left worth carrying away, and we shall want all the men we can muster to meet them."

"Well, we must make shift with the rice then for the present; and we'll have one of the camels killed to-morrow, so that for a time at least we may not starve," the lieutenant said, with determined cheerfulness.

The sergeant-major scowled darkly. "It's a dog's life," he muttered sulkily, "and a dog's death at the end of it!"

Lieutenant Lisle faced sharply round upon him, with flashing eyes and indignant aspect. "Look here, my fine fellow, we'll have no more of that, if you please. I am in command here, now that Captain Byng is dead, and I do not tolerate insubordination in any shape or form. If you mutiny, you will be shot, and that indeed is a dog's death, if you like."

"Beg pardon, sir, I didn't mean no offence, and I haven't followed the flag so long to turn traitor now," replied Warren, with an air of abject apology, he being not a bad fellow at heart, though grumpy withal.

"That's as it should be, only we will have no

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more grumbling, if you please. The fort must be held, or we must die at our posts," the young man said sternly, as he turned away to go in search of Bell.

And in the days that followed it really seemed as if death must be the alternative, for starvation stared the plucky little garrison in the face, and might only be staved off for a short time longer.

The camels had all been killed, and terribly tough eating they were too, especially the last, which had attained to a ripe old age, and really deserved a better fate than to be made into broth, and chopped up into steaks, of the consistency of shoe leather.

A little fish had been caught, but these proved neither palatable nor satisfying, yet were better than nothing; and the men took it in turns to fish every day, while the rest kept watch.

"There's boats coming, sir," called out the sentry one day, when hope had well nigh faded out of the hearts of the little company, although their pluck and determination remained undimmed.

"Boats, where?" There was glad relief in the young officer's tone as he sprang up the narrow stair, to the look-out tower at the corner, where the sentry was placed. He thought that help had been sent from Mal Mistri, or the nearest British fort in the opposite direction, but he never for a moment dreamed or imagined that the oarsmen might come with a hostile intention.

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"Hurrah, there, hurrah!" he shouted, sending his voice out over the waters of the Rann, in welcome to the approaching boats.

It struck him then as a little strange that no answering shout came from the men, who were steadily pulling nearer and nearer. So far, too, as he could see, there were no white men in the boats, nothing but natives; so perhaps it was merely the coming of a friendly tribe; they might even be Amrita's fighting men.

But at this juncture his speculations were suddenly and rudely interrupted by a violent push from behind, which tripped him up and bowled him over as clean as a ninepin, and at the same moment a shower of bullets whistled over his head.

"Who—what—and I should like to know what you mean by knocking me down, fellow?" he demanded, commencing to pick himself up again as quickly as he could.

A detaining hand was on his sleeve, however, and Lance Bullen, the man who had flung him, exclaimed hoarsely, "Keep down, sir, keep down, as you love your life, I beg of you; I was just in time to save you, then!"

"But they are friends," protested the officer. Yet even as he spoke, a chill suspicion of the good faith of the approaching boatmen crept over him, for friends did not, as a rule, announce their coming by rifle balls.

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"It looks like it," replied Bullen, then cried out again, "Lie low, sir, lie low, they are taking aim again. Maybe we can squirm across to the stairs on all fours, and so get under cover."

There was no time to be lost, the men down below must be warned, the gates must be secured, and the fort must be defended, so long as they had the strength to hold out. And following his subordinate, the officer crawled across the room, and began the descent of the stairs head-first, which was a fortunate thing, as a bullet struck his boot, carrying away a portion of the heel, and so startling him, that he just doubled into a heap and rolled to the bottom, where Bullen caught him in his arms.

"All right, sir, all right! They didn't hit you, did they, the black scum that they are?"

"No, only the heel of my boot, which can't feel, though the shock of it toppled me over. But, come on, we must make the best defence we can," and away went the lieutenant, with Bullen hurrying behind.

It was not much they could do, that small body of men, with their scanty ammunition and only one rifle apiece, but they intended to sell their lives as dearly as might; and the first boat-load of men that drew to dry land, just below the gate of the fort, had three of their number shot dead as the price of their temerity in venturing so near.

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The effect of this was to make the other boats hold off, waiting an opportunity to rush in and effect a landing, when the garrison were not so plainly on the alert.

Then came a spell of terrible anxiety to the band inside the beleagured fort. They had almost no food, their stock of ammunition was soon reduced to a few rounds apiece, and there seemed no help in heaven above, or in earth beneath.

It was then that Lieutenant Lisle showed the real grit there was in him. Calling the whole of his small company together, he told them that their chance of succour was so small, as to count for almost nothing at all. But they were soldiers, and by their calling pledged to death rather than dishonour, so he would commend them, each and all, to the care and keeping of a merciful God, and then they would go back to their posts and die fighting.

The lieutenant's prayer was very brief, and after a few extemporaneous petitions, which seemed to meet the case in point, he wandered off into the collect appointed for those about to die, and finished up with the benediction.

Hardly had they gone back to their posts again, and commenced to prepare for the last phase of the struggle, than a great confusion became apparent among the fleet of boats with which the fort was surrounded.

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"Why, I do believe, they are having a fall out among themselves," exclaimed Corporal Bell, who, with a glass, had been intently watching the manœuvres of the boats, and the very belligerent attitude of their occupants.

"There are some more boats coming up from the bend beyond that big boulder; and look, Bell, what on earth has that fellow got on, who is standing up in the first boat?" shouted the lieutenant, in tremendous excitement, as a naval engagement on a small scale took place in full view of the fort, shots being freely exchanged, though little damage resulted to either side from the rifle practice.

"I'm sure I can't tell, sir, it looks all ribbons and spangles, for all the world like a clown's get-up in England; I expect he is some great chief among these fighting darkies," returned Bell, in a puzzled tone.

Then suddenly the sound of a trumpet tootling rose above the shouts and cries of the fighting boatmen, and clapping his hands to his sides, Lieutenant Lisle burst into a great laugh.

"Why, Bell, don't you remember that chappie? He is the trumpeter from Rasputya, and that is the clown's dress which I sent as a present to the Ranee, instead of my old uniform."

"Then they are the men from the ridge, and may help us, sir, in which case we shan't have to

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leave our bones to whiten on the Rann when the waters go down," the corporal replied, eagerly.

"I hope not. Unless, indeed, the Ranee has taken a leaf out of her late father's book, and become as vindictive as her neighbours. I wonder how we can get to let that tootling individual yonder know what manner of men we are?"

"Easy enough, sir, let us sing that hymn that Miss Blake was playing, when they was going to make her suttee for Mir Aleffo. Them Rasputya fellows should know that tune, if they know anything at all," suggested the man, his gaze bent on the trumpeter, who seemed immensely proud of his finery.

"We shall have to sing the English words then, for I fancy that neither you nor I could manage the Sindhi version. But call out to the fellows below to come and help us, we must make as much noise as possible, in order to get a chance of being heard above that din out yonder."

The men came as they were bidden, scoffing a little perhaps at this psalm-singing freak of their commander's, yet taking care that no audible word of protest escaped them, for by this time they had learned it was best to treat the young officer with respect.

The Sikhs, of course, were not called, but remained below, in readiness to shoot any of the enemy who might be venturesome enough to get within range of their rifles.

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"Please, sir, we don't know the words," said Warren, speaking for Jefferson and Bullen.

"Never mind, you can hum, I suppose, like any other bumble-bee, seeing there ain't enough hymn books to go round," interposed the corporal, hastily, with a grin at his own small humour, as stepping closer to the lieutenant, he began to sing with all his strength of lung, which was by no means inconsiderable,—

"O, God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come."

Lieutenant Lisle's clear, penetrating tenor was leading, whilst the voices of the three men in the background rose and fell more or less uncertainly, as they sought to gather up the harmony of the old familiar tune, and swell the volume of sound.

As the singing continued, reaching out over the waters to the fighting that was going on between the besiegers and the new-comers, a sudden hush dropped in place of the shrieks and cries. Then the latest arrivals uttered a loud shout of triumph, manifesting the most ridiculous and extravagant delight, and throwing themselves into attitudes of admiring attention, after which they came paddling towards the fort, as fast as they could come, beating off the boats of their opponents with so much vigour and determination, that these fled before them in confusion.

Calling out to the Sikhs to stay their fire, Lieu-

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tenant Lisle ran down to the gate, followed by Bell, to give the warriors of the Ranee a welcome.

But it was a very funny sort of a meeting, the officer understanding not a word that was said to him, and even the corporal finding himself at a loss, despite his boasted linguistic accomplishments.

By slow degrees, however, they managed to understand each other; the men from the ridge bringing forward the trumpeter, and by words and signs, expressing their admiration of his finery, and their recognition of Lieutenant Lisle as the donor.

"It's all right, sir, and we're saved for this time!" exclaimed Bell, in a tone of relief, he having succeeded in mastering sufficient of the conversation to understand its import. "I've been in a many tight places in my time, but was never before got out of a fix by a fellow in motley; it beats my grandmother's tales into fits, that it do!"

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CHAPTER XXIX.

A VISITOR OF DISTINCTION.

NOR was Corporal Bell mistaken when he said they were saved, though indeed the process of rescue proved rather tedious, as the enemy required so much beating off that a message had to be sent the two days' journey to Rasputya for reinforcements. Even when these arrived there were many engagements, more or less decisive in character, with surprises, reprisals, and the like, all conducted with as much vigour and force as in more civilised warfare.

And whilst all this was going on, the eleven men shut up in the fort were little more than spectators of the fray, the men of Rasputya having given them to understand that they preferred to settle the matter in their own way.

There were very few wounded on either side, though some were killed outright when it came to fighting at close quarters with knives and spears; then, indeed, these denizens of the desert hacked and hewed with terrible effect on each others' naked limbs, for between the heat of the weather

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and the zest of the fray, it was little clothing these warriors wore beyond their birthday suit.

Heartily tired of seeing their fighting done for them were the soldiers inside the fort, but there was no help for it, and so they endured through the damp, hot days, on short commons still with regard to food supplies, yet happily removed from all danger of starvation, thanks to the generosity of Amrita's fighting men.

It was about a week after the first batch of reinforcements sent for from the ridge had arrived, and when the contest was pretty well at an end, that another fleet of boats was seen advancing. Then a great commotion arose, and a message was despatched in all haste to the British soldiers who held the fort, to inform them that the Ranee herself was approaching, she, with true feminine curiosity, being desirous of looking on a battle, and also of inspecting a house in which white men lived, and guarded the frontier of their great Queen.

"We shall have to receive her in state, Bell, so turn out all the flags you can find, and every coloured rag in the place as well. I should think the young lady is what we should call an advanced woman, by her coming to call on a bachelor household like this. I wonder what that doughty man of valour, Mir Aleffo, would have said to proceedings like this?" the lieutenant said, with an amused

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laugh, when the warning of the Ranee's approach was given to him.

"Why, he would have chopped off her head with the first knife that came handy, I expect, or stuffed her into a sack with a few stones as ballast, and dropped her into the deepest part of the Rasputya water-way," replied Bell, with a sagacious wag of his head, as he departed to see what could be achieved in the way of decoration.

For the next hour all was bustle and confusion in the fort, even the dusky Sikhs entering into the humour of the situation, and joining their efforts to those of their lighter comrades in the endeavour to make the queer old stronghold wear a festive aspect. The very asses took to braying, as though in jubilation over the event, whilst the sun worked its way through the heavy curtains of mist, for the first time for at least a week.

"I hope she won't be very hungry, for we haven't much of a spread for her to sit down to," Lieutenant Lisle said, a little anxiously, for he was very hospitable, and the scanty provision which was all he could make for his distinguished guest troubled him not a little.

"Oh, but she will be; strong-minded females are apt to be terribly voracious in their habits. I expect it comes from having so much brain, which is terribly wearing, I'm told. I only hope she won't cut up nasty about the scantiness of the

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fare, and order one of us to be served up as a sort of second course. Would you mind, sir, if I put some of them candles on a dish and called them an *entree*, or wax candy, they might make her feel she'd had enough for once, and so save the lives of some of us?" asked Bell, trying to look as if he really believed what he said.

"Perhaps she'd think we meant to poison her, as they did old Mir Aleffo, her father, in which case we might come off very badly indeed," rejoined the young officer with a laugh, "so I think, Bell, we had better keep the candles for their proper use, even though the feast suffers in consequence."

"Very well, sir," and the corporal saluted, going off with a chuckle to finish his arrangements, and making up his mind to astonish the Ranee, if possible, with the splendours and conveniences of that terribly dreary and barren old fort.

When Amrita's boat drew in to shore, near to the gates of Ahl Jaffer, Lieutenant Lisle was waiting bareheaded to receive her, whilst behind him were drawn up the remainder of the garrison, in the most spick and span array that was possible under the circumstances, all of the men standing stiff and rigid as if on parade, whilst their commander bowed almost to the ground in the deference of his welcome.

Amrita was hugely gratified. Nothing ever delighted her so much as functions and state ceremonials, and though she was crassly ignorant, and

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vain to a fault, her natural instincts and sound common-sense stood her in such good stead that she always bore herself with dignity, and avoided those pitfalls of etiquette into which a less clever person might have fallen.

Lacking the presence of Coralie to interpret, Bell was called into service, but he was not very ready, and by his blunders called down upon himself, more than once, the wrath of the Ranee, who was by inheritance rather short-tempered and impatient.

"I have to thank you, in the name of the Kaiser-i-Hind, for the kindness you have shown to the beleagured garrison of Ahl Jaffer, in allowing your warriors to fight for us, and bring us food in our great need. And Kaiser-i-Hind never forgets a kindness, or fails to reward a generous action," said the lieutenant, with pardonable pomposity, for he desired to impress upon his visitor the greatness and splendour of his sovereign's state.

This speech took some time to interpret, then Amrita turned with a smiling face to reply, "My fighting men would shed much blood in your service, because of the honour you bestowed on us in giving such gorgeous apparel for my trumpeter. Has your Kaiser-i-Hind garments as rich to wear?"

"Oh, yes, even the servants who wait at the palace gate are clad in scarlet and gold," returned the lieutenant.

"I should like to see her with my own eyes.

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The chief of the wooded ridges told me that she was hideous to behold, — a woman with the body of a lion, yet having seven heads. Was it true what he spoke?"

"Oh, no," replied the young man through his interpreter, "Kaiser-i-Hind is tender and sweet, good to look upon, glorious to serve, her soldiers fight for her to the death, and feel themselves honoured that they die for one so noble."

"Do you worship her in your country?" enquired the Ranee, who was greatly puzzled by such a display of loyalty and devotion.

"Oh, no; in our country we worship God, the one true God, who dwells up there," said the lieutenant, pointing skyward with a reverent finger.

At this juncture one of the Ranee's attendants plucked at her arm, shaking it vigorously, and pouring out with breathless haste what appeared to be a string of questions.

Amrita nodded briskly for answer, and then pushed the woman away. "Tell me, how is the white-faced one who is my friend, and when is she coming back to make me merry and happy again?" she demanded imperiously. And Lieutenant Lisle answered for Coralie as best he could, though he had no intuition to warn him of the decision that had been taken, and which in the future might bring his young cousin face to face with the Ranee again.

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"I want her," said Amrita, with a sudden dewy softening in her glittering eyes; "she taught me what was good and true, but I cannot always remember the things she said. I weep for want of her, and I do not like you because you took her away. But I do like you because you sent the garments of splendour, which have made my trumpeter more good to look upon than any other person who dwells in the Rann."

A happy inspiration seized the lieutenant, and, acting upon it, he secured the interest of Amrita and the fealty of her warriors for the British rule by an adroit promptness highly commendable to him.

"I will tell Kaiser-i-Hind of all your goodness to her distressed soldiers, and then she will send you some wonderful garments, which shall dazzle the eyes of all who see them, and turn beholders green with envy."

Amrita's eyes sparkled, for the promise of personal finery was a bait by far too tempting to be withstood. "I am Ranee of Rasputya; the warriors of that man of valour, Mir Aleffo, have sworn to do me service; I say to them, 'Go, fight for Kaiser-i-Hind,' and they go. I am great and powerful, a woman to be feared in all things, but I have not many garments of price. If Kaiser-i-Hind will send me gorgeous apparel, then will my fighting men protect her interest from end to end of the great morass, and even unto the borders of Thar."

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Lieutenant Lisle bowed so low it almost seemed as if his nose would touch the ground, and then he promised that the garments of price should be forthcoming, just as soon as a messenger could come from England to bring them, and meanwhile he would ask that the warriors of the ridge would use their energy in clearing away those bands of marauders, who were preying on the border forts, and stopping communication between fort and fort, even attacking and slaying the garrisons who, in lonely places, supported and upheld the British flag.

To this Amrita consented graciously enough, then asked to be shown over the fort, where she inspected every hole and corner with the greatest interest and amusement, even descending the ladder to the ammunition room, where the party from Mal Mistri had found the remnant of the garrison in such a parlous plight.

But she turned up her royal nose at the meal they had spread for her, turning away from the table with the air of a spoiled and pettish child. "Is that all the food you have to eat, those dry, unsavoury messes? Then I wonder not you look so lean, and have so little power to fight. My warriors shall bring you more plentiful supplies, so that you grow fat, wax strong, and slay men as easily as men spear fishes."

With this cheerful and bloodthirsty aspiration the Ranee departed in as great state as she had

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come, whilst Lieutenant Lisle and the corporal looked at each other with congratulation in their eyes.

"You've clinched the bargain, sir, and no mistake, and I'm bound to say we've got the best of it. A few women's gauds, frocks, and ribbons and so forth, ain't a bad price to pay for the fealty of a robber tribe like them raiders of Rasputya, and she'll keep 'em up to their work, too, you mark my words if she don't; you can always trust a woman to keep the pot boiling," and the corporal rubbed his hands in great glee and delight.

But there was a cloud on the face of the young man as he answered soberly, "I can't help feeling as if I had only half done my duty, Bell; that is, I did my part right enough in all that concerned the interest of my Queen, but I left undone that part which had to do with my Creator."

"How, sir?" queried Bell, with a puzzled look.

"If Mr. John Blake had been in my place, do you think he would have been satisfied with arranging to send the Ranee some finery for her personal wear, in return for the life and death fealty of her people?" said the lieutenant, asking another question by way of answer.

"Well, sir, he's a parson, don't you see, and a missionary parson too, so it would have been his business to bring in a bit about the Bible, and to remind the lady that she possessed an immortal

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soul, which would outlive all the frills and furbelows of the world down here," Bell replied, anxious to set the young man's heart at rest.

But he did not succeed. For the remainder of that day, and indeed, for many days after, there was a brooding care on the face of Lieutenant Lisle, and in his heart a pang of real and keen regret that he had so far failed in his Christian allegiance, as to have spoken no single word to Amrita concerning the future life, which should be, when things of earth had passed away.

The Ranee was as good as her word; every fighting man in her service was pressed into the work of clearing the frontier, and re-opening communication between the widely scattered British forts. The raiders of the wooded ridges fled before the tootling of her gorgeous trumpeter, and the strength of the federated tribes was broken and scattered by the superior manœuvering of the girl on the ridge of Rasputya, who had come to rule in place of Mir Aleffo.

So the dreaded rising was quelled, and the inhabitants of those dreary regions were delivered from the horrors of a guerilla warfare, and the desolation that follows such strife. But only in the heart of one man was hid the knowledge of a great opportunity missed. Amrita received the garments of price in due course, but with them came no word of a robe white and shining, which

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might be hers, when the things of earth had ceased to be.

Lieutenant Lisle was promoted for the part he played in the holding of Ahl Jaffer; and every one, saving himself, declared how well he deserved the honour he had gained.

Of personal bravery he had no lack, it was only in things pertaining to the Kingdom that he showed the white feather, and kept silent when a word in season fitly spoken might have brought a great reward.

But the rain ceased, the waters abated slowly from the face of the great Rann, and the colder breath of winter stealing o'er the dreary plains, brought the herds of asses from the hills, to the warmer pasturage of the wooded ridges, and the sheltered valleys opening to the sea.

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CHAPTER XXX.

A REALISED PURPOSE.

YEARS passed away. And once more Coralie Blake was at the ridge of Rasputya. Not as a prisoner this time, however, but in the capacity of a well-trained, thoroughly equipped medical missionary.

It was all so familiar, and yet so very strange; and as she walked up the steep side of the ridge on the evening of her arrival, it seemed to her as if the intervening years had been swept away and she was a child once more. But change had touched the ridge also, and progress of a sort had come to it, a queer one-sided sort of civilisation, which, whilst it developed the people from one point of view, left the other entirely and severely alone.

Under the firm and rather autocratic rule of Amrita, the raiders of Rasputya raided no more, ceasing their aforetime connection with the robber tribes of the Rann, and settling down to the avocations of peace, when peace was practicable. And when it was not, they fought on the side of the British, freely laying down their lives in the cause of Kaiser-i-Hind, because their Ranee willed it so.

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The reason of Amrita's devotion to the white nation over the seas was not far to seek, for Lieutenant Lisle's promise had been faithfully kept, and every year a big case of smart clothing found its way to the isolated ridge in the great Rann,—court dresses, ball frocks, smart walking costumes, ribbons, gloves, and feathers, none of them quite new, but all of the best materials and most stylish make.

It was for these that the Ranee sent forth her men to fight, and thought herself amply repaid. She had not a single aspiration in life beyond being richly dressed, and holding the reins of government in her strong young fingers. And her desire for another sight of Coralie, her former friend, was mainly because she hoped to gain some fresh ideas of personal adornment from the missionary's daughter.

But though the people were lodged in better houses, and most of them had clothes to wear, the march of civilisation stopped suddenly at this point, leaving the mental and moral part of their being entirely uncared for.

Since the death of Mahandra, no priest had been permitted in Rasputya, while every form of religious observance had fallen into disuse. And since even false gods may be better than none at all, the dwellers on the ridge were fast lapsing into a condition that was ultra-heathen, if such an expression might be allowed.

But Coralie, in her enthusiasm and zeal, meant

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to alter all that; and she had come in the hope and expectancy that in all matters of reform of this kind, Amrita would be only too willing to second her endeavours. The change in the Ranee, however, was far greater than Coralie had imagined, and she was amazed at the transition.

Always surrounded by a bevy of waiting women, whose business it was to flatter and admire her, Amrita had grown as vain as a parrot, and so imbued with a sense of her own importance, as to be utterly intolerant of any opinion save her own. Only Ratnawati had been allowed to advise and direct her; and even the old woman's candid strictures had often been very badly received. So that when Coralie came prepared to speak plainly on all subjects, whether pleasant or unpleasant, it was not wonderful that the Ranee became first irritated, and then positively angry.

She had expected that Coralie would act as a kind of superior lady's-maid or companion to her, teaching her the latest English method of hair-dressing, and beguiling for her the tedium of the long and weary hours in which she had nothing particular to do.

But to this the young missionary gave a point-blank refusal; she had come to the ridge to teach and instruct the people in the religion of peace and goodwill, to help them to care for their children, and to show them how to aid their sick. Therefore

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to lose, even for a time, the sight of her high vocation, was not to be thought of for a moment.

Ratnawati was ill when she arrived, and Coralie speedily saw that it was only a question of time, for no earthly skill could avail to save the poor old creature's life, and all that remained was to soothe her path to death.

It was easy to teach the sufferer where to look for a rest that should be eternal, for Ratnawati was eager and willing to learn; but it was decidedly not so easy to find a time to sit beside her uninterrupted by Amrita, or the jostling cares of State.

Ratnawati had been more than waiting-woman,—she had been prime minister,—and even now that she lay on her dying bed, it was her hand that regulated the doings of the State, and her shrewd old head that planned the well-being of the community.

In the intervals of her comparative freedom from pain, she would talk confidentially to Coralie about the things which troubled her in Amrita's administration. "She, Ranee, too hard on fighting-men sometimes, but she got good heart underneath; if she Christian like you, then she be all right."

"Oh, Ratnawati, if only she were a Christian; but she will not listen when I try to teach her," replied Coralie, in very real distress.

The black woman made a strange clucking sound with her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

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"She, Ranee, come some day,—she very good heart. Poor old Ratnawati no live to see it, but that no matter, 'cause she very tired, and want to go badly to white people's heaven."

"You shall go soon, very soon; just a little more patience to wait," murmured Coralie; and the old, wrinkled face gathered a smile of content, whilst the dim eyes shone with a happiness that was not of earth.

"Ratnawati feel very nice now," she said, softly; "won't white missie read out of good book, then Amrita come in, and she hear it too?"

Coralie did as she was requested, and presently the Ranee stole in for a little time, then vanished again, when the young missionary knelt in fervent pleading for the parting soul, and for the Ranee who ruled in Rasputya.

Ratnawati lingered for some weeks after Coralie's coming to the ridge, and day by day she was instructed in the things which pertain to everlasting life. Sometimes Amrita would slide quietly into the sick-room, when Coralie was leading the stumbling feet of the old black woman into the paths of peace. But the Ranee would never permit her white friend to speak to her on spiritual subjects, declaring haughtily that while she was young and strong, and with long years of goodly life to look forward to, she would not tolerate any reminders of the time when she would be old and in daily danger of death.

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So Coralie was perforce silent for the present, where Amrita was concerned, though in other directions she was active enough. A school had been started, in which for two hours every day she instructed the children of the ridge in the first elements of learning. A sort of adult school was also opened for the older folk, who were in their way as ignorant as the juveniles, and much more difficult to teach.

In all these endeavours to better the condition, moral and spiritual, of the people, Amrita was more than willing to help and encourage the zealous young missionary, for she was shrewd enough to know that the more enlightened and civilised her subjects became, the more they would prosper and increase, and the greater she herself would become in consequence.

The Ranee's approval added greatly to Coralie's influence, and to her power to do good, since the people had to come and be taught whether they would or no, seeing their sovereign insisted on their learning. So, whether it was a class of women who were to be instructed in the first principles of domestic economy, or a class of men who were to be taught mental arithmetic, she was always sure of finding a gaping, eager multitude, ready to echo with avidity any statement she might order them to make,—and equally ready to forget it again as quickly!

But when in the ardour and strength of her zeal

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for reform, Coralie asked that the Sabbath might be for the Lord, and one day in the seven set apart for rest and worship, neither Amrita nor her people would in any way consent. Odd hours and half-hours, when the day's work was done, they might be willing to give, but a whole day,—why, it was monstrous, even to think of such a thing!

This check caused Coralie some discouragement, and much anxious thought as to the best means of meeting and overcoming the difficulty. Then she made her decision. Six days in the week her classes were taught, and every duty performed with careful precision, but when Sunday came she gave herself up to rest and meditation, only going, when evening came, to the big mud-walled shed, which had been the banqueting-hall of the late Mir Aleffo, to play the little travelling harmonium she had brought with her, and sing hymns in the Sindhi tongue.

The Ranee grumbled and pouted, even had sulks, like the spoiled child that she was, over the refusal of Coralie to walk and talk with her on Sundays, to admire her garments of price, or in other ways minister to her comfort and pleasure.

Then Ratnawati died, and over her grave another battle had to be fought. Since religion, in any shape or form, had been abolished from the ridge, the death ceremonies had fallen into disuse also. Even the cleanly and wholesome practice of burn-

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ing dead bodies had been abandoned, and the corpses were now merely flung on the ground in the smashana, to be devoured by the jackals at their leisure.

But Coralie had resolved that no such gruesome fate should overtake the faithful and devoted servitor, to whom both she and the Ranee owed so much. And when the breath left the body of the black woman, she, with her own hands, laid it out for burial, then covering it with a white sheet, went out to have the grave prepared.

Already in her walks she had chosen a place for the cemetery; and this no melancholy spot amid the thick bush, but an open slope on the hill side, where the strong wind blew from across the stretches of the great Rann; where, too, God's sun and rain could visit the place in equal measure.

"A grave must be dug for Ratnawati, such as was made for the white sahib, whom the waters brought to the ridge," she said, giving her orders to the mohanas, who had assisted at the burial of the man supposed to be her father.

"Ratnawati only old black woman; fling her in the smashana, jackals eat her when they hungry enough," replied one of the men sullenly.

"Would you like to be treated so?" asked Coralie, stung to indignation by the brutal indifference of his answer.

"Me not dead yet," retorted the fellow callously.

Then she resolved to try another style of argu-

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ment. "Do you like me to stay here, and make music for you, and to teach your wives how to cook you good food, and to keep your children from dying?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" chorused the crowd, which had already been considerably added to, for Coralie was a popular person on the ridge, and the people liked to gather round her when she appeared among them, to tell her their grievances, and listen to her words of wisdom on these and other things.

"Then, for my sake, I ask you to dig a grave for Ratnawati, who was good and true, and whose spirit has gone to dwell in the Christian's paradise. If you do not heed my words, and pay proper respect to those who are dead, I shall have to leave you, and go back to my own country."

A whole chorus of grunts and groans arose at this, whilst a score of volunteers pressed forward, prepared to dig not merely one, but half-a-dozen graves if need were, rather than lose the presence among them of this gracious white woman, who united in one person every virtue and talent under the sun, who was so skilled in medicine, too, that even the very sick grew well at her approach.

So the grave was dug, and the limits of the cemetery laid out, and well defined. Then came the funeral, at which Coralie must perforce officiate herself, seeing that there was no man missionary available.

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"Will your highness come to the burying in the ground of Ratnawati's body?" she asked, in the very respectful tone that was most pleasing to the dignity of the Ranee.

"Oh, no; how could I, and she just a common person too!" screamed Amrita, with an angry toss of her head, and an impatient twitch of her second-hand Paris gown.

"Ah, I forgot! In my own country it is so different, you see; there, the great people, the princes, and nobles go to the funerals of those whom they love and respect, even Kaiser-i-Hind herself sends some one to represent her, but then England is not Rasputya," and Coralie heaved a diplomatic sigh.

"I shall go to the burying. Why did you not tell me what your customs were? Oh, I love to be like the brilliant, polished English people, who know so much, and whose garments are so good to look upon," said Amrita, whose ruling passions were to ape the manners and customs, and wear the same clothes as the subjects of Kaiser-i-Hind.

It was a strangely solemn burial. Every man, woman, and child on the ridge who could be present were there, grouped in dense masses, as close to the grave as they could gather, while Coralie, in her close-fitting dress and hat, read the burial service, and the Ranee, gorgeous in a pink satin dinner gown, and a bonnet of Paris make, which had once adorned the head of a duchess,

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acted as chief mourner, weeping copiously the while. In her way she had loved the dead woman,—it was only the selfishness of her undisciplined nature which so retarded the expression of her affection, and made her careless and indifferent, when her devoted servitor lay sick unto death.

"'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,'" read Coralie, in her clear, penetrating voice, whilst overhead a winter sun shone in a cloudless sky, and a strong wind, fresh and invigorating, swept across the wide stretches of sand, whence the waters had retreated.

The service was ended, and the crowd was dispersing, when a mohana, who had been absent fishing in a pool some miles to the northward, came running, breathless and exhausted, to where the Ranee was lingering near to Coralie, and falling on the ground at her feet, began to tell, in broken snatches, of an armed force that he had seen advancing across the stretches of sand towards Rasputya.

"Perhaps they come in peace, or to trade," said Amrita, endeavouring to appear confident, yet only succeeding in looking frightened. It was the first time an enemy had menaced her on her own territory, and so she was to be forgiven, if for a short time her courage deserted her when the foe was at her doors.

"They had guns and spears, and they have come

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to kill, to kill, to kill!" shrieked the spent mohana, who still grovelled on the ground as if powerless to rise or stand.

His frenzied manner and shrill cries spread swift panic among those who heard him. The fighting-men rushed away to don such armour as they possessed, and the women, crying loudly, gathered about the Ranee, imploring her to protect them.

Amrita rose to the occasion with wonderful quickness, and, terribly scared though she was, hid her fear from the lamenting women around her, and began to give sharp orders for the defence of her kingdom and stronghold.

"See here, women of Rasputya, who bear the burden and heat of the day, the men it is who fight and kill, but women may watch whilst the warriors rest. Cease, then, your tears and your outcries, gird yourselves for action, and form into a ring of watchers to guard the base of the ridge. It is at night that the enemy will come; until then let the fighting-men slumber in peace, so that they wake strong and refreshed for the fray."

Amrita's words were wise and good, and the excited women heard them with acclamation,—even the mohana ceased to grovel and shriek, and set up a feeble cheer of applause. The children too young to watch were gathered in the house of the Ranee, where the personal attendants of her Highness took care of them, and a lively task they

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must have found it, until the urchins, worn out with yelling, dropped asleep one by one.

When sunset came, and the darkness of a moonless night brooded down upon the ridge, a cordon of female sentinels was formed, that stretched round the whole limit of the high ground. Coralie, who had asked to share the toil and the danger, was deputed the task of visiting the watchers one by one, to see that they did not sleep; and even the Ranee herself was out and about, cheering the timid, and encouraging the wavering by the force of example.

Going from sentinel to sentinel, making her way through the thick-growing euphorbia bushes which skirted the base of the ridge, Coralie came presently under the cliff-like projection where Cuthbert Lisle and Corporal Bell had left their horses that memorable day, when they rescued her from the suttee of Mir Aleffo.

It was past midnight, and intensely dark, yet, her eyes being accustomed to the gloom, Coralie could make out the dim forms of the trees, and the denser black of the projecting rock-masses. Then she started in sudden alarm, for just beyond where she had paused, and coming in a straight course for the upward path, which the relief-party from Mal Mistri had taken that time so long ago, was a moving line of black, a deeper black, which showed up plainly against the background of the sandy plain.

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For a moment her heart almost ceased to beat, in the terror of the discovery, for here was the enemy close upon them, and the sentinels all in ignorance of the impending danger! She was opening her mouth for the first shrill shout of warning, which should wake the ridge to warfare, when a sudden recollection made her desist.

At the top of the cliff, where the path debouched on the open ground, was a guard-house, and there a hundred men, armed, and with their rifles lying beside them, were asleep. If she could only reach the guard-house before the sentinels gave warning of the approach of the foe, the warriors would be awake, and ready to receive their nocturnal visitors with such a welcome, as should make them chary of ever attempting another expedition on similar lines.

To think was to act. And away she started, running up the precipitous path at the top of her speed, catching her feet in the trailing creepers, bruising her limbs against the sharp projecting rocks, becoming breathless, spent, and almost exhausted; yet, still pressing on, for it seemed to her as if the safety of the whole ridge hung on her ability to reach the top, and rouse the guard, before the outcry of the sentinels should let the enemy know that their coming was expected.

A hundred yards more, then fifty; she was almost at the door, when the profound hush of the night-

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silence was broken by a cry, shrill and piercing, from somewhere far below, and following close upon it, a wild chorus of alarm. The ridge was awake in good earnest.

Out turned the guard, without a moment's hesitation, prepared to shoot in any direction, yet having not the slightest notion of where their fire would be most effectual.

But Coralie was there. In half-a-dozen hurried words she had made it plain to them from which side most danger menaced, and silently, with never a shout nor a shot, the body of men poured down the cliff path, and melted into the gloom.

She turned away then to go in search of Amrita, for her share in the work of the night was done, at least for the present, and the fighting and bloodshed that in a few moments would be raging below, appalled her even to think of.

"Him, moon, coming up now, and fighting-man see to shoot," chuckled a lame old veteran, the only person left in the guard-house on the top of the hill.

Coralie's gaze turned to the horizon, and the line of light that was broadening and brightening there. It was too early for the dawn, but in Rasputya the moonlight nights almost equalled in brilliancy the radiance of the day.

Truly the invasion had been well-planned, and but for the timely warning of the mohana, the

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inhabitants, taken unawares, might have all been shot down like sheep.

Just then the firing began in the plain below, and she rushed away to the house of the Ranee, to soothe the frightened women gathered there, and to pray for the time when war and bloodshed should be no more.

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CHAPTER XXXI.

THE ENEMY AT THE DOORS.

THE foe that had come so stealthily in the silence and hush of the night, was a strong detachment from the wooded ridges, a part, in fact, of the force which, years before, had worked so much trouble among the British forts of the frontier, and which had left the remnant of the garrison of Ahl Jaffer to the tender mercies of gunpowder and a slow fuse.

Since then, the chief of the tribe had been more disposed to live at peace with his neighbours, only raiding when supplies were short, or when there seemed a chance of getting gain from the process.

But the ridge of Rasputya was an enviable position, since it commanded the deep water-way to the sea, and so had a commercial value possessed by no other ridge in the whole of that wide morass.

Moreover, the chief had no great social status, like that enjoyed by the ruler of Rasputya, and so, being a man of resource, he had conceived the brilliant idea of taking the ridge by storm, carrying off Amrita to add to the number of his wives, —of whom he already possessed half-a-score,—and

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thus gaining for himself the title and place of the Rao of Rasputya.

It was all very finely arranged and planned, only like so many other schemers, he had failed to allow for unexpected contingencies; especially had he overlooked the fact that the whole of the Ranee's fighting force might chance to be at home.

This, indeed, was not surprising, for in most winters they were abroad during the whole of the dry season, escorting caravans from point to point, even undertaking contracts of portage themselves, when work was scarce. But it so fell out that, having fulfilled all work that was in hand, they had returned to the ridge on the previous day, in order to carry out some of the Ranee's plans for improvement, before the rains set in to render such labour an impossibility.

So the fighting, though sharp, was quickly decisive, and the victory was on the side of those of Rasputya, the vanquished ones coming to the conclusion in good time that they had had enough of it, going in such speedy retreat that they did not even stay to take their wounded with them.

These the Ranee's fighting-men would have put an end to at once; but Coralie, who, braving the manifold horrors of the battle-field, had ventured to the spot in the interest of mercy, cried appealingly to the leader, "Spare their lives, poor fellows,

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then when they get better of their hurts, they will fight for the Ranee, instead of against her!"

"Him, fighting-man of the wooded ridges, no to be trusted at all," retorted the Rasputyan, shaking his head with disapproving emphasis.

"Not in the past, perhaps; but then the poor fellows had not been taught a better way. Give them this one chance, for my sake, and then if they are still not to be trusted, why, you can fight them again another day, and kill them straight off," she answered, readily.

The veteran shook his head once or twice, and muttered to himself, then gave the order to stay the slaughter, and to hold all such as recovered from their wounds prisoners of war.

The amazement of these captives, when day after day passed, and their lives were still spared, was a sight to see. No such leniency had ever before been known in the annals of Rann warfare, and the innovation filled them with suspicion and dismay. All this Coralie had expected, and she took the first opportunity of putting their fears to rest.

"When you are well, you will serve the Ranee, because she has given you back your lives," she said one morning, when going her hospital rounds.

"Him of the wooded ridges, kill poor fighting-man on battlefield," said one of the convalescent.

"Yes, yes; but the Ranee has saved your lives, and now in gratitude you should serve her," said

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Coralie, seizing the opportunity to win their allegiance for Amrita.

"We will," grunted one of the spared, "and we will kill him of the wooded ridges, when he comes to steal her away, and make himself Rao in her room." To this the other wounded ones assented, with many a grunt and groan of approval.

Amrita's jubilation at the victory knew no bounds; and, seeing how much she was touched by her people's zeal and devotion on her behalf, Coralie ventured to approach her again, with the request for a Sabbath-day observance, and again was refused.

"No, no, we cannot afford to give up a whole day every week to religion, it would not pay. Think of the work that would have to be neglected. I mean to make my people great, and they will never be that, if they waste so much time over religion," said her Highness, in a tone of decision; and Coralie realised, with a sigh, that the time for a day of rest had not yet come to Rasputya.

The monsoon that year came very early, and stayed very late, which was contrary to the usual order of things. The rain,—it rained every day, and all night too—coming down, not in genial showers, gentle and refreshing, but in torrents, as if it would wash away everything in its course. And week by week the waters rose and rose, until it seemed almost as if the ridge itself would be submerged, whilst the mohanas, who lived in the

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lowest ground of all, were forced to take refuge with their families higher up, where the waters could not reach them.

It was like being shut up in Noah's ark, to stand on the wooded heights of the ridge, and look out over the surging, seething expanse of waters, whilst the damp heat was terrible to endure, and made even the strongest droop and fade under its influence.

To make matters worse, Amrita fell sick, and day by day grew steadily worse, causing terrible anxiety to Coralie, who had to give up every other duty to nurse her friend.

Bad news flies fast. And the tidings of the Ranee's critical condition reached the chief of the wooded ridges, filling him with unholy delight, at the thought of how matters were shaping, to the furthering of his ambitions. Since, if Amrita died, her warriors would have no one to be zealous for, and might be won by bribery, to submit to that which could not be brought about by force.

Inspired by these hopes, he set out on the war-path again. This time he chose to harry the widely-scattered forts of the frontier, raiding and slaying almost unchecked, so difficult was communication between fort and fort in the flooded condition of the country.

Soon a token of distress was brought to the ridge; this was not a written message, but a little

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kid done to death by cruel usage, and with three of its four legs broken, showing how terrible was the strait of those who had sent to ask for help.

Coralie, who during the illness of the Ranee acted as prime minister, had no choice but to let the warriors go.

Again she sought Biboo, the war-worn veteran, who acted as the Ranee's commander-in-chief, and consulted with him on the wisest course to be pursued.

"You are sure, Biboo, that the token has been read aright?" she asked, feeling how painfully lacking in detail was this mode of correspondence by signs.

"Sure," replied Biboo, who was in his way as anxious as herself, "and three legs broken means that him weakly one in very bad case, indeed."

"But," said Coralie, anxiously, "suppose this is merely a ruse to get you away from the ridge, so that he of the wooded ridges can come and seize this place whilst you are away?"

"Him no dare," said Biboo, calmly, for he had no fears on this score, "or when we come back, we kill him and his fighting-men all up dead."

"But before that he would have killed us," said Coralie, who failed to find the conversation satisfactory.

"Him no dare," repeated Biboo, calmly, as before.

This consolation notwithstanding, Coralie watched the boats filled with warriors recede into the fog,

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with a feeling of terrible despair at her heart. Then came into her mind the comforting words of the hymn, that had meant so much to her in other trying times of her past, when everything had looked as black as black could be,—

"O, God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come."

"Of what use is it for me to call myself a Christian, if I cannot trust my God in times of trouble, when most I need Him?" she asked herself, ashamed at the momentary distrust and want of faith; then going back to her post of watcher in the Ranee's sick-room, betook herself to prayer.

Amrita had been lying for hours past in a heavy stupor, that was not sleep, but which, as Coralie knew, must terminate either in death or renewed life. Sending away the woman who watched by the bedside, she knelt down there to pour out her heart in fervent agonising prayer for help and guidance, for strength to endure, and wisdom to act. All unaware of it, she was praying aloud, when a feeble hand touched her arm, and a quavering tone enquired, "Are you talking to your God, and is He here in this room?"

Coralie looked up with a start, to find Amrita's eyes wide open, and with a look of consciousness in them.

"Yes, your Highness, I was talking to my God, and He is always near to those who trust Him," she said, learning a new lesson of faith and trust

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from this ignorant enquirer, who had not yet cared to learn of His greatness, or to trust in His power.

"Tell Him that if only He will let me get better again, I will learn to serve Him, and my people shall keep Sunday on the ridge," whispered the invalid, and then she fell asleep, the first natural slumber that had come to her for days past.

Coralie bent over her in trembling thankfulness, knowing that now there was hope of speedy recovery. Was the dark hour passing already? Truly it was good to pray, and to trust, when the answer followed so quickly.

The days passed slowly and uneventfully after this; the rain abated some of its violence, whilst a cool breeze stole across the steamy Rann. Under its influence the Ranee rapidly progressed towards recovery, and the first Sunday after the crisis came round.

"Tell my people they must not work to-day; we will give it to the great God," said the Ranee, with a touch of the old imperiousness that had been so subdued by her sickness.

And Coralie sent the message abroad over the ridge, rejoicing not a little that the resolution made in illness was to be kept in health. The people grumbled a little at Amrita's mandate, for with the absence of the warriors, there was a double portion of toil for those who were left. But they obeyed, nevertheless, and that day was kept, for the first time in that dark place of the earth, holy unto the Lord.

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CHAPTER XXXII.

TO HELP A COMRADE.

CAPTAIN LISLE was lounging in a hammock-chair in the coolest part of the barrack compound at Cawnpore. He was feeling very tired and listless, sick to loathing of the brilliant sunshine, fierce heat, hard duty, and dull recreations, that are the setting of a soldier's daily life in India.

But he was going home on furlough. His belongings were packed, his passage arranged for, and in two weeks more he would be starting on the long journey to Tupton Magna, where his mother waited to welcome her soldier son.

Meanwhile, he had to get through the next few days as best he could. Chafing somewhat at the slowness with which they passed, and making endless plans for the future, when he should have shaken off this dull lassitude that oppressed him so much, he performed languidly such duties as fell to his share, ticking off each day as it passed with great and increasing satisfaction.

Presently his servant appeared with a letter on

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a salver, a bulky, untidy looking missive, showing signs on the outside of long journeying.

"The English mail in already!" he exclaimed in surprise, knowing it was not due until the next day.

But Ji-Bah, the native servant, only salaamed lower still, it not being given to him to tell, by the strange signs and fearful symbols on the outside cover, where the letter had first started from.

Kurrachee was the postmark. And the contents were momentous enough to give Captain Lisle a sleepless night, and to destroy at one fell swoop all those aerial structures of pleasure and ease, which his fancy had been building with untiring industry these many days and weeks past.

The writer was a brother officer, just now in command of that solitary frontier fort Ahl Jaffer, and a very close friend of Cuthbert Lisle's during the time when they had been stationed together on the Chitral border. Since then Leonard Baker had been home on furlough, had married and brought his wife out with him, but the latest tidings the captain had received from his friend, spoke of Mrs. Baker's enforced return to England on account of her health. To those tidings the letter just received was the sequel.

"Dear Lisle,—I hear that you are due home on furlough next month, and being hard pressed, I am writing to beg a favour of you, which it seems to me I could not ask of any other man, and which I would not ask of you, were I alone concerned.

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"You know my wife has gone home ill; well, the specialist whom she consulted, has given her three months to live,—just that, and nothing more.

"I'm not whining for sympathy, and all the rest of it, in writing thus to you, as far as my own part is concerned; I'm prepared to bear my trouble without making myself a nuisance to anyone. But Daisy, poor child—and she's only just turned nineteen—says she can't die without me, and pleads so piteously for my return, that I am prepared to do almost anything, short of deserting, to grant her prayer.

"I have asked at head-quarters for leave of absence, but I cannot get it, since the authorities cannot undertake to recognise the claims of a dying wife, and you know that I can't afford to sell out, so I am asking you in all Christian charity to exchange with me, and come here to take charge, whilst I go home to Daisy.

"It may not take all the time of your leave. And directly the need of my presence has ended, I will come back with all speed to set you free.

"I know how great is the boon I am asking, and I have no hopes, present or future, of ever being able to make it up to you; so your reward, old fellow, must be in the knowledge that you are making death easier to my poor, little stricken girl. I was half-tempted to send you her letter, only it seemed too sacred for any eyes but my own, as you will understand some day, when you are married yourself.

"Affairs here are fairly quiet just now, though there have been rumours of fighting among the tribes. There is general dissatisfaction, you know, because the Ranee of Rasputya is so favourable to British interests; and, if the other tribes could only succeed in overthrowing her power, they would just jump for joy at their cleverness. But they can't do it, so far; and, personally, I wish the Ranee long life, and a prosperous reign; for without the help and protection of her warriors, it would go hard just now with the forts of the frontier, and especially with Ahl Jaffer, which is little better fitted to endure siege, or resist attack, than it was in the past when you achieved fame, and gained promotion in its defence.

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"Young Frank Leslie, of yours, has been gazetted to the lieutenancy here, in place of Green, promoted, and he starts at once, in order to arrive before the monsoon does.

"Come with him, if you can, so that I can go to my wife; and may God bless you for your goodness to a comrade in his trouble.

"Yours ever,

"LEONARD BAKER."

There had been a time, and Cuthbert Lisle remembered it well, when, during their companionship on the Chitral border, Baker had saved his friend's life from the bullet of a murdering Afridi, who for hours had stalked the soldiers as a hunter stalks his game.

It was Baker's turn then. It was his own turn now to be self-sacrificing and generous, and to do good, hoping for nothing again. Captain Lisle knew what his answer must be before he had got more than half through the letter, but for all that he spent a sleepless night in pulling down all that aerial architecture, that had been so delightful to build. Morning found him ready to act, and this he did with so much promptness and despatch, that by the time night came again, the question of his departure for Ahl Jaffer was only a matter of hours.

Frank Leslie, his travelling companion, was a gay, light-hearted boy, fresh out from England, desperately home-sick occasionally, but, as a whole, too happy-natured to indulge in fits of gloomy repining for the unattainable.

He was hugely delighted to have the captain

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for a travelling companion, for Lisle was popular in his regiment, being looked upon as a first-rate sportsman, and a thoroughly good fellow, and, in consequence, one whose society was to be sought after, and highly prized in the obtaining.

"You've been to Ahl Jaffer before, haven't you?" asked Leslie, as side by side, they stood on the deck of the small steamer, which was to convey them to Kurrachee, and saw the city of Bombay melt into purple distance before their eyes.

"Rather! and a tottering time we had of it, too. Old Bell was with me that time; and a nearer case of touch-and-go I never had, before or since."

"Ah! and it is terribly isolated, isn't it,—miles and miles away from civilisation, and all that?" asked the younger man, eagerly, elated at the prospect of adventure, and of possible danger, which a residence at Ahl Jaffer might entail.

"Say leagues, when you are about it, for somehow or other, miles are quite too small and unimportant to be mentioned at all, when it comes to a question of distances on the Rann," replied Cuthbert Lisle, with a laugh. And then he fell into a musing mood, whilst his companion rattled on about all sorts of things, from pretty partners at regimental balls, to frontier fights, winding up with a second-hand commonplace about the disturbing influences which missionary enterprise was wont to exert on the native mind.

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"What is that you are saying?" asked the captain, sharply, waking up from his reverie, with a heavy frown on his face.

Frank Leslie looked his surprise, but answered readily enough, "I was only saying that we should have no frontier fights, and no internal disturbances with the natives, if only those poor, deluded parsons could be induced to stop at home, and not meddle in things they know nothing about."

"Who says they have meddled?" asked Captain Lisle, his frown gathering in blackness.

"Oh, that's patent to most people, I think,—at least, to all those who know anything about it. The natives have got a religion of their own; take it as a whole, it is not a bad sort of a creed either, and they are perfectly satisfied with it, so where's the sense in forcing on them a new religion which they don't want?"

"Look here, Leslie, are you arguing from theory or practical experience?" asked the captain, with ill-concealed impatience.

"Oh, well, it's what everybody says," returned the young man, with a slightly mortified air.

"That is just because everybody knows nothing whatever about it, then. Now, I can speak from actual experience, and I don't mind affirming, in the face of every fact and statistic which you can bring to refute it, that we hold India, not so much by the sword, as by the power the Bible wields."

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Frank Leslie remaining silent, the captain went on, "No mere outsider can ever gauge the good influence which one devoted missionary may have upon a community; and surely, when you speak of these natives out here having already a religion which is good enough for them to live and die by, you are forgetting all the manifold horrors of infanticide and suttee. Perhaps you have never seen, as I have, the sights on the Ganges and the Indus, and the daily horrors to be witnessed there. And yet, even that is not half so bad as it used to be, thanks to the spread of Christianity through the land."

"Ah, well, I didn't know, you see," replied Leslie, in half apology, desperately anxious to stand well with his superior.

"That is mostly the position of the outside world in respect to missions and their uses," returned the captain with a smile, "only unlike you, Frank, as a rule they refuse to be shown their own ignorance on the question."

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CHAPTER XXXIII.

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF.

So actively did the travellers push forward on their journey, that Ahl Jaffer was reached before the monsoon set in, and Captain Baker, with a fervent word of thanks, started without delay to the side of his dying wife.

Then came the monsoon, and no sooner had the waters covered the face of the Rann, cutting the solitary fort off from communication with the civilised world, than the place was invested with a dusky army in boats, who carried rifles, shot at long range, and picked off the garrison with unerring aim, directly they showed above the walls, or on the gateway covering the strip of dry ground.

It was history repeating itself; and Captain Lisle thought grimly enough of that time when he had travelled up from Mal Mistri, and rescued the handful of garrison from a dreadful death. Well, it might be the turn of someone else to relieve him this time, or to come and find the whitened bones, which the jackals had left, after the tribesmen had done their worst.

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Meanwhile, they had guns and ammunition, and set about making such a sturdy resistance, that the beleaguering force was beaten back with heavy loss.

Then the enemy drew off, and on all the watery horizon there was not a boat to be seen. If he had not known their stratagems so well, Captain Lisle would have been tempted to think they were beaten. As it was, he spent the time during the cessation of hostilities in strengthening his defences as best he was able, and doubled his vigilance, that no treachery from the inside or the outside might betray the weakness of the fort.

A day passed; two days, and still there was no sign. Truly, it seemed as if the foe had drawn off in good earnest, deeming discretion the better part of valour, when the guns of the fort had to be reckoned with. In order to test the reality of the raising of the siege, Captain Lisle had a dummy man made and clad in uniform, which was then conveyed to the top of the tower, where it lounged at ease against the low wall. But not for long. Five minutes had barely passed, when a shower of bullets whistled over the fort, and the dummy man lay prone on the floor, its head riddled with holes, which testified alike to the skill of the marksmen, and their nearness to the fort.

"Why, where can the wretches be?" asked young Leslie, with a half-scared look on his face; for this was a very different thing from open warfare, where

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the enemy may be seen and faced, with an equal chance on both sides.

Captain Lisle pointed to a tope, or group of trees a little to the westward, that stood on a low sand-ridge. They were little more than bare, leafless stems, with a small bunch of foliage at the top. Scanty cover there for a foe to lie hid, and yet it must be there or nowhere, since there was no other spot of dry ground within rifle range.

"Why, what do they expect to gain from that sort of thing?" asked young Leslie, as he reconnoitred the position from a port-hole on that side of the fort.

"To tire us out. It is what they did that other time Ahl Jaffer was invested, and before Bell and I reached here. I expect, too, they have left some fellows there to snipe away at us, whilst the boats have gone back for reinforcements, after the arrival of which they will finish us off at their leisure."

"Bad as that?" queried Frank Leslie, with a long, low whistle of astonishment.

"Quite as bad, according to my experience. I only wish there was any sort of chance of getting a message to Rasputya. If the Ranee had two fighting-men left, she'd spare us one, I am sure," went on the captain, who was pacing up and down the narrow limits of the room with restless feet and an anxious face.

"Let me go! I'll find that precious ridge,—if it

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hasn't been drowned out, that is,—and I'll bring help back, too!" said Leslie, eagerly, with that thirst for adventure, no matter how risky, which reminded Captain Lisle of his own more youthful days, when he had chafed at the monotonous slowness of life at Mal Mistri.

But years had taught him prudence since then, and he would risk no lives under his charge on an expedition so hazardous.

"You would be shot before you had gone three boats' length from the gate; and if you slipped away at night, the probabilities are that you would row straight into the arms of those gentry doing target-practice over yonder. No, no; it's not to be thought of. We must just stay here and see the thing out, and if necessary, die together. That, at least, will be easier than going off one by one to meet our fate on that solitary waste of waters yonder."

"Here come some boats again!" exclaimed Leslie, eagerly, some hours later, catching sight of a number of dark specks on the horizon. "Perhaps the Rasputyans have heard of our plight, and sent us help already."

"We shall soon see," remarked the captain, whose tone, however, was not quite so hopeful, and he hurried from the room to confer with the Sikhs on guard at the gate.

The fresh arrivals proved to be the dreaded re-

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inforcements, and now, indeed, the watery waste seemed all alive with boats and men. Active preparations were at once set on foot for carrying the place by storm. Battering-rams of primitive description were rigged up and brought forward, and a great display of aggression made, for the benefit of the garrison shut up in the fort.

Then the big guns broke out. The shells went booming over the water, sinking a boat or two, and striking terror into the hearts of the dusky forces out yonder, who, dexterous as they were with their rifles, had never made a close acquaintance with anything in the shape of cannon.

"When night comes they will attack at close quarters," said Captain Lisle, grimly.

"What will you do then?" asked young Leslie, anxiously.

"I don't know yet. It is of no use to waste ammunition by firing at random in the dark. I'd rather save it to help in blowing up the whole show, when things get really at their last pinch," rejoined the captain, whose face wore an expression of sickly pallor, while his hands twitched nervously.

For a moment young Leslie thought his superior was afraid,—the next instant he was ready to call himself hard names for the suspicion, Captain Lisle's record in the past being much too full of bravery and reckless daring for any such idea to be feasible.

"Don't you feel well?" he asked, deciding that

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it was physical disability, and not lack of courage, which made the other shiver until his teeth chattered, despite the stuffy closeness of the atmosphere.

"I feel beastly; got a touch of fever, I expect. But I shall be fit enough when it comes to fighting, don't you fear. Hullo, what's that?"

The query was addressed to a native, who entered dangling a scrap of blood-stained cloth in his fingers, which he held out to the captain for inspection.

"Him, one-eyed blackie from the wooded ridges, say he want speech of white sahib; he no hurt, no kill, only send sahib captain this," said the fellow.

Captain Lisle took the rag with a doubtful hand, then suddenly he started violently, for it was no fragment of a burka, or any other portion of native attire that he held, but a strip of regulation hospital bandaging, with the name, St. Ruth's Nursing Home, stamped in the corner.

"Where did this come from; who is the bearer?" he asked eagerly, for he remembered St. Ruth's as being the name of the place where Coralie Blake had gone to train after leaving college, and a wild wonder came to him, as to whether she had come to Rasputya again, and so was nearer than he believed. At his own request Coralie's name was never mentioned in his letters from home, and so he had no knowledge of recent events, or that she had been for some time past resident on the ridge, where Amrita ruled.

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"Him, Lham's father, he say, and Lham got killed, and fetched back to life by a white witch; so he and Lham not fight white sahibs, or else white witch bring awful punishment upon them."

"Bring the fellow here to me," said the captain eagerly, cutting short the explanation, and seeking to get at the fountain-head of the information.

"Him, Lham's father, no come inside, else fighting men outside say he big traitor, and kill him up sharp," objected the native, squirming violently by way of emphasis.

"But if he won't come inside, how did you get to speak to him?" asked the officer, oppressed now by the fear lest there might be treachery in the camp.

"Him, Lham's father, make say, we got traitor fellow inside here, and so he creep up, and make talk how to get a way inside. Instead, him ask would white sahibs send a token to the Ranee's fighting men, to come and drive off the warriors of the wooded ridges?"

"I must see this fellow somehow; if he won't come to me, I must go out to him. If only we could send a token to the ridge, there might be a prospect of the tribesmen being beaten off even now," said Captain Lisle, turning eagerly to Frank Leslie, who had been a silent but keenly interested listener.

"Do you mean a letter?" asked the young man, with a puzzled look.

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"No; the natives in these parts look on letters as witchcraft pure and simple, and they would sooner touch red-hot iron than pick up a piece of paper with writing on it. Besides, even if I could send a letter to the ridge, no one there would be able to read it. This man, if he is true, will tell me the token most likely to do what is wanted, and we must put our trust in Providence, and wait patiently."

Young Leslie shrugged his shoulders with a doubtful air, but he ventured on no comment before his superior in rank, deeming it wiser to keep his unbelief to himself.

That night, when darkness had fallen, and the rain was coming down in sheets, Captain Lisle, wrapped in a big cloak, and accompanied by the native who had brought him the fragment of hospital bandage, stole out through the gate, and down to the water's edge.

No sound was to be heard, save the splash of rain on the water; behind them the fort lay in black silence, before them the dark face of the waters merged into the dense gloom of the sky above them, with never a point of difference to show where the one ended and the other began.

Then a harsh guttural voice spoke out of the darkness at their feet, "Him, white sahib give Lham's father a token, and he send it straight to the white witch on the ridge."

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"Yes, yes, we have the token here," replied the captain, dropping his voice almost to a whisper. "But tell me, what sort of a white witch is it that bound Lham's wounds, and brought him back to life again?"

"A kid, is that the token? Ah, it is good, and will bring the help the sahibs need; its legs shall be broken, in sign of haste, and all shall be well," said the voice out of the darkness, and an arm, dripping and naked, was thrust forward to take the little dead kid carried by the captain's companion.

"But the white witch; tell me of her," insisted the officer, dropping a firm, detaining grasp on the slippery wet arm.

"'Tis a medicine woman of wondrous skill; and it is said she comes from the land where Kaiser-i-Hind has her home. But the token, give it to my hand, and let me begone, lest a worse thing befall," and seizing the carcase, the speaker disappeared, dropped into the black, gleaming water, and was gone.

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CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE WHITE MEDICINE-WOMAN.

THE days on the ridge passed in slow, anxious monotony, no message had come from the absent warriors, and from Amrita down to the humblest mohana, all shared in the same unrest and longing for news, that should tell of the safety of the fighting men, and their victory over their foes. A watch was kept both night and day, only as yet there had been no sign or token to reward the vigils of the watchers.

At last, one morning about the dawning, a boat was espied coming towards the ridge, and in it two of the Ranee's fighting-men.

Surrounded by a little crowd of anxious women, Coralie hurried down to the landing-place, eager to learn the worst or the best of the news they brought.

"Him big battle; much killing," said the spokesman of the two whom the boat had brought, whilst the other, his companion, had his jaw bound up roughly, as if he had not come unscathed from the fray.

There was a smothered cry from the women, but

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it was quickly hushed, and they waited eagerly for further information.

"Where was the trouble?" asked Coralie, who had never been very clear as to the destination of the warriors when they set out, although Biboo had seemed perfectly satisfied concerning the direction he was to take.

The man flung his hand backward in the course from which he had come.

"Him of the wooded ridges, he went forth to kill, and he found some sahibs shut up in a fort, so him of the wooded ridges swarmed his fighting-men up from the boats, to bang, hammer, smash him fort all down. But sahibs have plenty big gun, which roar like thunder, and away went arms and legs, heads and bodies, here, there, all over place, and men died, very great lot."

"What then?" asked Coralie, for the man had stopped, and sitting on the ground, opened his mouth widely, in token that he was weary, and hungry too.

"Him from the wooded ridges had to send for fresh warriors to help him kill the sahibs with the plenty big gun. And one of these was father to Lham, whose life white teacher made Biboo save after the fight, so he sent the token to Rasputya, because the Ranee's fighting-men always help the sahibs, and him, Lham's father, grateful, 'cause white teacher not let Biboo kill."

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"And is this all that you have come to tell us?" asked Coralie, as the man began to eat voraciously at a mass of cooked fish brought by one of the women.

"Him, sahib, sent for white teacher to come and cure all the peoples that are not dead yet. One sahib very sick. He got malaria; but he fight, and he fight, till he almost die. No medicine man there, so white teacher go and make him well," grunted the man, between the mouthfuls.

A moment Coralie hesitated, filled with a shuddering repugnance for the duty before her. Then, leaving the women to look after the wants of the men who had come in the boat, she hurried away to put together a stock of medicines and bandages, for the use of the sufferers she was going to succour.

Amrita, though loth to spare her, yet urged haste in her going, and in a very short space of time the start was made, and the boat was rowed swiftly onward, out to the wide silence of the flooded Rann.

Coralie was gathering up her courage for the sights she might have to see, for not all her medical training, or her knocking about in the world, had accustomed her to scenes of bloodshed, or to the war trophies of gaping wounds and shattered limbs. But her duty lay straight before her, and she would do it to the best of her skill, let the cost be what it might.

"What is it called, this place where we are

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going?" she asked of one of the men, as the boat skimmed rapidly over the waters, aided as well by the current as by the oars of the rowers.

"Ahl Jaffer," was the reply, and at the name she gave a little start of recollection, for that was the very same place from which her so-called cousin, Cuthbert Lisle, had been rescued by the Rasputyans years ago, when she was at Tupton Magna, in the old dower house with her father, mother, and Susette.

She had only seen Cuthbert once since then, and that had been during the time of her college course —an interview fraught with pain to them both— and of which she had never spoken to a living soul. For he had asked her to marry him, growing violently angry with her when she refused, and even gibing at her resolution to go and carry on her father's interrupted work in the mission-field.

Since that time she had thought of him as little as possible, and spoken of him less. But in her last letter from home, Susette had written that he was expected on furlough, and it was thought that he had already sailed for England.

Somehow, she thought of him a good deal, during that day and the next, when there was nothing to do but to sit in the small cramped boat, and watch the rowers at their work. And she told herself that she was very glad indeed to think

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he had gone to England, since there was thus no danger of a chance encounter for many months to come, by which time she might get used to the idea of seeing him again, and not shrink from it as she did now.

"Him, Ahl Jaffer, want a talking-wire; he never be safe till he get it," announced one of her escort, when the first sight of the mud-walled fort was seen standing on the high ground above the waste of waters.

"It is such a long way from there to Mal Mistri, and the valleys are so deep, that the wires would be under water in the wet season," Coralie answered, thinking of all the discussion about the matter that had taken place at home, after that other time when Ahl Jaffer had been in jeopardy.

"Him talking-wire come from Mal Mistri to Rasputya, and from our ridge to Ahl Jaffer; Ranee like to have a talking-wire; she British all through," said the man, solemnly.

"Why, of course! I wonder no one has thought of it before," she exclaimed, surprised that no shrewd head had ever hit on that way out of the difficulty before.

"Him thinks, not always do," replied the fellow, with a sagacious wag of his rumpled greasy pow, and then bent himself to his oar with redoubled vigour, as if begrudging every moment spent in lingering over the journey.

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When the boat arrived, the fort was found to be almost in ruins. Since the sending of the kid, and before the arrival of Amrita's warriors, the garrison had been very hardly beset, and one end of the fort had been destroyed by fire, whilst the other part had been battered down in places, the crumbling walls having suffered considerably from the bullets of the marksmen. And everywhere about the small margin of shore, under the lee of the masses of fallen mud-masonry, and even in the boats moored close in-shore, were the little bits of tents under which the wounded lay, many of them lacking even that small bit of comfort.

To the score of wounded Rasputyans might be added many men from the wooded ridges,—though these had died in such numbers, from enforced neglect, that there were not more than twenty-five of them alive when Coralie went her first round.

But, first of all, she must see the sick sahib. Hardly had she set foot on dry land, than Frank Leslie, with his arm in a sling, and his head roughly bandaged, greeted her in the English that she had not heard for so long.

"Madam, I do not know how to thank you enough for coming; I only fear lest you come too late."

"I will do what I can, only, please, take me to the—the sufferer," she faltered, remembering for the first time that she did not know the name of the individual whom she had come so far to succour.

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The young fellow bowed, and turned to lead her into that part of the fort, where still a shelter might be found. But Coralie noticed that he limped and swayed when he walked, as if from wounds and weakness.

"Poor boy! He looks as if he needed to be put to bed and nursed himself," she murmured under her breath, as she picked her way among the *débris* strewing the courtyard, or skirted the deep puddles on her way to the sick chamber.

Just inside the fort,—lying under a wretched shed, that had a gaping hole in one end of its roof,—lay a figure, clad in bright-coloured rags, with bits of tinsel clinging to the tatters here and there.

"Is that the Ranee's trumpeter, and is he dead? Oh, she will be grieved!" exclaimed Coralie, taking a step in the direction of the prostrate form.

"He is not dead; indeed, there is every probability that he will get better. But, madam, I pray you do not linger, you are needed so sorely indoors," the subaltern said, with so much earnestness, that Coralie hastened her steps, while her heart, for some unknown reason, began to beat at a furious rate, and a trembling sense of fear shook her heart.

But when, a minute later, she stood by the little camp-bed, the beating of her heart seemed to cease altogether for a moment, for the man lying there in his dire extremity, was—Cuthbert Lisle.

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CHAPTER XXXV.

RECOMPENSE.

FOR one moment Coralie stood as if dazed with the shock, then she rallied, and was ready to act. There was a large amount of resolute determination in her character, and it was all brought into play now. She asked the brief but necessary questions as to the conditions of the sickness that had gone before, and made up her mind as to the future treatment most suitable for the case.

How her heart failed her, as she busied herself with her task. The man on the bed lay like one already dead, in the greatness of his prostration, and only the breath from his parted lips, and his faintly-beating heart, showed him to be still alive. Had she the skill to bring back the life so nearly fled? For many hours this seemed very doubtful; then by slow degrees a slight improvement set in, and hope grew stronger.

But the harassing care of those days, and the wearing toil of looking after so many sick folk, with the anxiety lest her stock of medicines should not hold out, tried Coralie heavily. Taking her

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sleep by snatches, and her meals as she walked about, she dressed wounds, adjusted bandages, and went her hospital rounds with as much precision and care as if she had been a full-blown M.D., instead of merely a medical missionary.

The young subaltern, Frank Leslie, proved an invaluable assistant, although, owing to his wounded condition, he could not move very fast in the execution of her commands.

The anxieties of the siege, and the responsibilities of command, had done much to sober and steady the young officer, whilst the insight he had gained into native character and disposition, had shown him how sorely these dark places of the earth needed the Sun of Righteousness. Never again would his voice be raised against missionary enterprise, but rather would he help forward all efforts for the coming of the Kingdom.

Besides Leslie and Coralie, there were only two white men at Ahl Jaffer at this time,—Captain Lisle, in his present helpless state, hardly counting as a man at all. But a message had been sent to Mal Mistri, via the ridge of Rasputya, and reinforcements might be expected to travel the same way, only it would be some time before they could arrive.

"Do you think the captain is getting on, Miss Blake?" asked young Leslie one morning, when Coralie came back to the sick-room, after a round among her patients outside.

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"I hope so. There is certainly more appearance of life about him than there was, and——"

But that sentence remained unfinished, for at this juncture Captain Lisle opened his eyes, and looking up at her, said, in a feeble tone, "Coralie!"

Poor young Leslie stared at the sick man and his nurse in the greatest perplexity and amazement. He had no idea of the connection which was almost, but not quite relationship, and catching the expression of Miss Blake's face, and the sweetness of her smile, as she bent over the invalid, the subaltern immediately began to feel himself *de trop*, and speedily edged towards the door, whence he disappeared, leaving the two alone.

Yet he need not have gone. Captain Lisle was too weak to do more than lie silently looking at the countenance of his nurse; whilst she was too wise and prudent to permit her patient to become unduly excited.

It was more than a week later before Coralie understood how it was that Cuthbert Lisle should be lying sick of malaria at Ahl Jaffer, instead of away on furlough in England.

"When I do go, Coralie, you will go too,—it shall be our honeymoon," he said, with a touch of masterfulness in his tone.

"I don't know about that; I have my work to think of," she responded, in a dubious manner, though the rose-flush on her face, and the love-light in her eyes, rather belied the doubtfulness.

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"I do. And you will return all the stronger for your work from the change and rest," he replied; then his voice took on a more wistful tone, "besides, you can't always be breaking promises, and you promised that day on the Thames, that you would pay me back sometime for coming to rescue you from Rasputya."

"And have I not? Did I not come all this way to Ahl Jaffer, in order to succour a sick sahib, who at this moment doesn't seem specially grateful?" she asked, playfully, though with tears in her eyes.

"You did not know whom you were coming to help; besides, you would do as much for any one of the poor fellows who are lying wounded here. What an angel you have been to us all!"

"Nonsense. Angels don't carry medicine-bottles, and they don't run round armed with sticking-plaster either, that I have ever heard of," she retorted, with a laugh. "And, Cuthbert, I am sure you ought to be invalided home, and not wait for your furlough. Suppose you were to go down with another attack of malaria."

"I daresay you would come to nurse me. But we shall see. At least, I shall not go unless I take you with me; that must be my recompense, Coralie, for having had to bear one refusal from you."

* * * * * * *

It was a long time before Captain Lisle was able to leave Ahl Jaffer, and to travel to Mal Mistri for

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a change of scene, and Coralie was back at her work on the ridge again, instructing the children in the school, and helping Amrita to order her kingdom in the fear of the Lord, before this took place.

But her work was easier now, for Amrita had risen from her sick-bed with very changed ideas of life and duty. Vain, to a certain extent, she always might be, and fond of fine dress, but half her selfishness was gone, and it was for her people, and their real welfare, that most of her thought and care were spent.

The British Government expressed itself well pleased at the rare fidelity of this tribe, who owed no allegiance but such as it chose to give, and an influential big-wig was sent to interview the Ranee, to discover what nature of recompense would be most valued by her, for the great services rendered by her fighting-men.

And this time it was not for flowers and feathers, and second-hand Paris gowns, that she bartered the blood and lives of her brave warriors, but with the dignity befitting true royalty, answered,—

"I desire the good of my people, that they should prosper and be content, therefore give us the means of trading. My people shall collect from the other tribes such goods as they may have for barter, and you shall take these from us, giving in return such articles as may find a ready sale among the scattered tribes of the Rann. Let British ships come openly up the Rasputya water-way, and then

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there will be less likelihood of their coming secretly, on errands of disloyalty and fraud."

The big-wig heard this request in profound astonishment, and departed wondering mightily at the wisdom and shrewdness of the dusky potentate; but then, he had not read the history of Amrita's past, nor did he know of the influence that dwelt behind the throne, in the person of Coralie Blake.

But the British Government was graciously pleased to forward the Ranee's desire for commercial prosperity. Merchant ships came up the water-way, the ridge became a town, and even the distant and often beleaguered Ahl Jaffer, lost something of its solitude, and half its isolation, because of the "talking-wire" that bound it to the ridge of Rasputya.

But before that took place, Coralie had gone with Cuthbert Lisle on furlough to England, there to be welcomed by all her dear ones, and also by bluff, hearty Corporal Bell, who had retired on his pension, and settled down in the village of Tupton Magna.

A married missionary and his wife took up their abode on the ridge after Coralie's departure. A church was built and dedicated, and at its opening, the first hymn that was sung was one in which every ridge-born person could join,—

"O, God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come."

THE END.

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